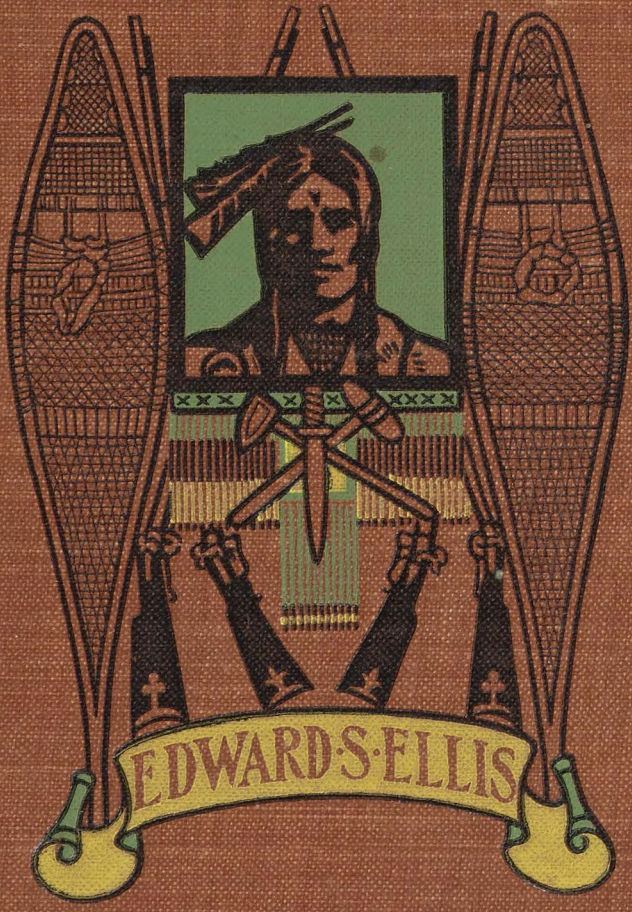
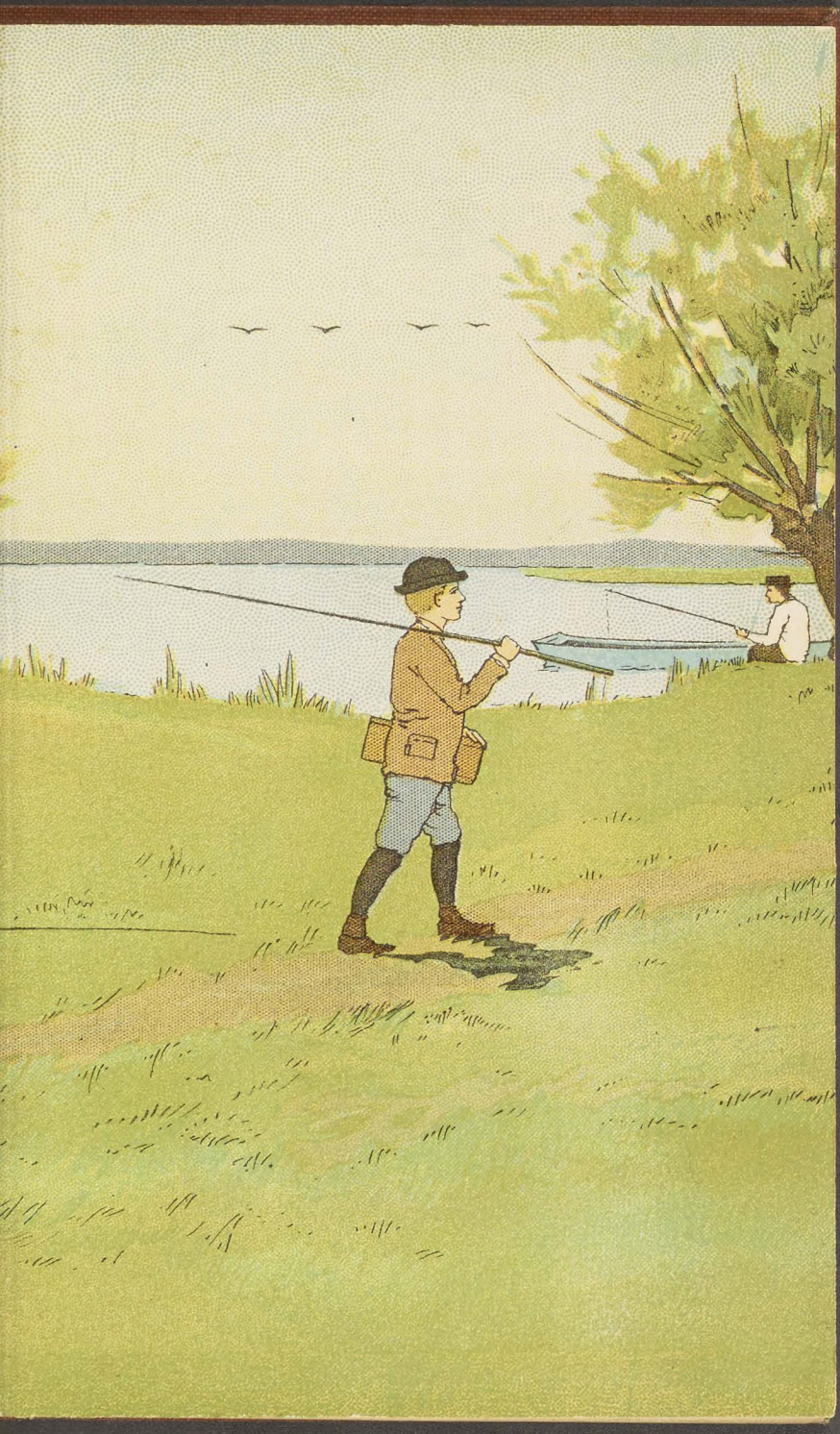
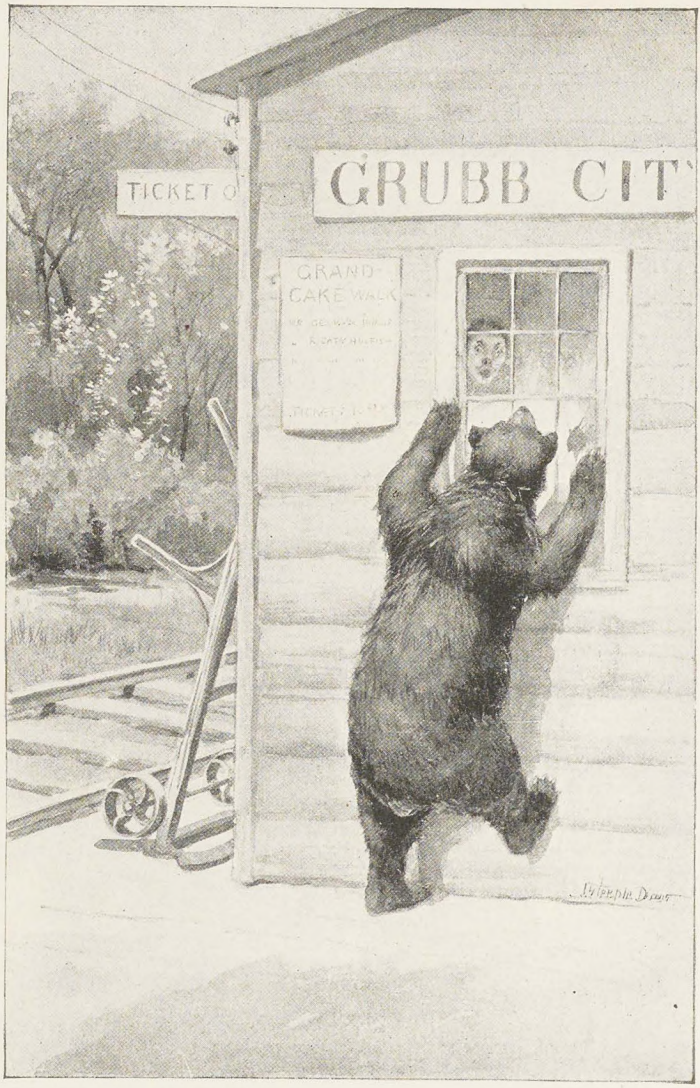
JACK MIDWOOD



THE
HENRY POLISSACK
COLLECTION







"Blivens and the Bear."

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JACK MIDWOOD

OR

BREAD CAST UPON THE WATERS

BY

EDWARD S. ELLIS

AUTHOR OF "LOG CABIN" SERIES, "DEERFOOT" SERIES,
"WYOMING" SERIES, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	In Superintendent Starkweather's Office	5
II.	"Help! Help!"	15
III.	Re-enforcements for Grubb City	22
IV.	A Resignation	31
V.	A Late Call	39
VI.	Who was the Caller?	49
VII.	An American Citizen of African Descent	57
VIII.	Blood on the Moon	65
IX.	The Cipher Telegrams	75
X.	P. Cato Hulfish	83
XI.	A Couple of Calls	92
XII.	Peace or War?	100
XIII.	A Ghost	109
XIV.	In the Haunted House	117
XV.	The Eavesdropper	127
XVI.	Building Better than They knew	135
XVII.	On the Move	143
XVIII.	"The Wire to the East has been cut"	153
XIX.	The Extra	161
XX.	Two Brave Men	169
XXI.	The "Hold Up"	179
XXII.	The Party of Search	187
XXIII.	"Honor among Thieves"	200
XXIV.	Tempting Fate	213
XXV.	A Sudden Impulse	226
XXVI.	Run Down	239
XXVII.	Bread cast upon the Waters	252

JACK MIDWOOD.

CHAPTER I.

IN SUPERINTENDENT STARKWEATHER'S OFFICE.

SUDDENLY Jack Midwood, the most expert telegraph operator in the Wareton office, with his hand still on the key, threw back his head and burst into loud merriment.

He was known as one of the most congenial of companions when off duty, but none devoted himself more strictly to business than he. He often sat at the instrument for hours without speaking or thinking of anything besides that which had claim to his attention. He was never known to make a mistake. Many a time he managed to show his brother operators, Will Victor and Fred Opdyke, important errors in the reception or transmission of despatches; but he did it so quietly that Superintendent Starkweather, sitting at his big desk in the next room, with the communicating door nearly always open, never suspected anything of the kind.

Midwood was popular with all, for he had nothing low or mean about him. He was a college graduate; but the death of his father when the son was on the point of taking up the study of law left a loved mother and an invalid sister dependent upon the earnings of the son for their daily bread; for the parent, although once wealthy, lost his all in Wall Street, and the shock of his sudden poverty was the real cause of his death.

There was no murmur from Jack Midwood. In truth, he seemed glad of the opportunity to prove his affection for the best mother and sister, as he insisted they were, that any unworthy young man had ever been blessed with.

Since Jack Midwood has considerable to say and do in the incidents that follow, I must give some brief information concerning him; for I assure you the young man deserves it.

He was of slight frame, unquestionably handsome, possessing perfect health, though it was clear that despite his fine figure he was neither strong nor an athlete. He could not be very powerful, for there was not enough of him. He was an excellent musician, and earned a fine addition to his salary by singing in the principal church choir in Wareton. He was an expert amateur with the violin or piano, and had that peculiar faculty, sometimes seen, of being

able to master almost any instrument in a surprisingly short time.

Occasionally, when business was slack for a brief while in the office, Jack, while sitting at the operating-table, would sing in a low tone some of Foster's sweet melodies, or imitate the flute or mouth-organ or bag-pipe with a skill that would deceive almost any one.

It was his rule not to do this when Superintendent Starkweather was in his room; though Victor and Opdyke often urged him, for any person was sure to be charmed by the wonderful music which this young man could evolve at will. But one day Jack was made to believe the head officer was out; and being in a lively mood, and with a lull in business, he gave an exhibition that would have delighted a man, even though "fit for treason, stratagem, and spoils."

Just as he had finished, he noticed a peculiar smile on the faces of his associates; and Victor walked over to him and whispered, —

"You didn't suspect it, Midwood, but the superintendent has been in his room all the time you were giving your performance."

"Great Cæsar! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Never mind; I can see him from my desk, though he is not in sight from here. When you began he was writing a letter. He stopped and looked up, as

if he didn't understand it. Then he leaned back so he could peep through the crack of the door at you. I rested my head on my hand and played 'possum. He caught the direction of the music, and looked at you in astonishment, as if it was past his comprehension. How in the mischief can you do it, Jack? I've nearly burst my throat and can't make a start."

The admiring operator broke in with this question, as he saw the picture of dismay on the face of his friend.

"I'll get even with you for that trick," was the rather irrelevant reply of Midwood, whose anger, however, was half assumed.

"Well, as I was saying, the governor soon understood that you were giving the music without any help except nature, and his face was the picture of astonishment. Just then you struck in on 'Suwanee River'—that's the governor's special favorite"—

"How do you know it is?" demanded Midwood with forced brusqueness.

"Why, he has said so in my hearing about a hundred times. When his daughter Rosalie wants a new dress, or any special favor, she sings that for him, and the old gentleman shells out. He says that Stephen C. Foster is the greatest composer ever born in this country or anywhere else."

"So he was, in his line. He is the only composer we ever had whose songs come straight from the heart. But, confound it! you're off the subject. I tell you, Victor, I'm mad all the way through over this trick you played me."

"Well, you needn't be; for you captured the governor."

"Bosh! Like enough he'll give me my walking-papers."

"I wish he thought half as much of me and Opdyke as he does of you. But, as I was saying, 'Suwanee River,' or 'Old Folks at Home,' he thinks, is the finest song ever written. He says it knocks Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and the other fellows sky high. I've heard that he asked his minister, as a special favor, to arrange so that one of the hymns each Sunday should be sung to that tune. I am not sure, however, that the report is true; I have never asked him about it."

"I shouldn't advise you to do so."

"When you began on his favorite, you fetched him! He gently slipped off his eyeglasses, folded his hands across his expansive chest, leaned back, closed his eyes, and just inhaled it. When you switched off on to 'Nelly was a Lady,' he started as if from an electric shock; but that tickled him. He never stirred until you stopped; and then he gave a sigh of regret,

and slowly resumed his work, blamed sorry because you had stopped."

"Victor, I don't want to be personal; but I consider you the most monumental fabricator in the employ of the W. G. C. & N. You have done me the basest turn one mortal ever did another; and, by my faith, I'll have thy head if I have to wait two days! Begone, now, and let me not look upon thy hated face!"

Victor returned laughing to his table, while Midwood, with an assumption of indignation, busied himself with the work before him. One of the best points about the young man was his freedom from affectation or anything in the nature of conceit. He was never heard to boast. One holiday he and his brother operators witnessed a shooting-match between two famous marksmen with revolvers. They did well; and an offer was made of one hundred dollars to any one present who would beat the score of the winner, which was forty-eight out of a possible fifty. No one accepted the offer; but that afternoon, when the three young men were taking a stroll through the country, Midwood fastened a bit of white paper to the bark of a tree, the size of a target used in the match, paced off the same distance, and then, without stirring from his tracks, made a clean score of fifty.

"Gracious alive!" exclaimed the astounded Opdyke; "I never saw anything like it. Why didn't you take up that offer?"

"I don't earn my living that way," replied Midwood, shoving his pistol in his hip pocket, and resuming his walk and the conversation, which was upon a different matter.

Victor had hardly taken his seat after the little musical episode described, when the superintendent pronounced his name in his accustomed gentle voice.

"Yes, sir," replied the young man, springing up, and hurrying into the office of the "governor." The latter motioned to him to close the door behind him.

"Mr. Victor, you heard Mr. Midwood a few moments ago?"

"Yes, sir; I couldn't very well help it, even if I wanted to."

"Had he any instrument in his mouth or about him?"

"No, sir; nothing at all."

"How in the name of goodness did he manage it?"

"It's more than I can understand; but, Mr. Starkweather, I am beginning to think there isn't anything Midwood can't do; I never heard any one beat him in singing, on the violin, piano, or flute; he hasn't his equal with the revolver or bowie-knife"—

"What!" interrupted the shocked superintendent.

"I beg pardon; I never saw him handle a knife except at the table — that was a slip on my part. But I never knew him to try anything, no matter what, that he didn't do better than any one else, I don't care who it is."

"Does he often indulge as he did a few minutes since?"

"No, sir; only when there is a let-up in work, though he can do it just as well without interfering with what he has in hand. He didn't know you were in your office this afternoon; for if he had, nothing would have made him disturb you."

"Ah, just so; well, now, since he has made a beginning, and, as you say, he does not allow it to interfere with business, why — ah — I have no objection to your saying to him that I am not — well — not displeased; it doesn't disturb me, and since you and Mr, Opdyke appear to enjoy it, why — ah — I will not object."

"Thank you; I will be very glad to tell Midwood what you say."

The mischievous operator turned to pass out; but as his hand touched the knob, the superintendent spoke —

"Ah — while it is in my mind, Mr. Victor, I think I recognized one of the songs as something

I heard before, when I was a lad. Let me see, perhaps you can assist me to recall the name."

"I know," exclaimed the guileless young man; "you mean 'Old Folks at Home,' or 'Suwanee River' — the sweetest song ever written, by the sweetest song-writer that ever lived, Stephen Collins Foster. No wonder the audiences run wild when Patti sings that; for it comes straight from the heart, as she says, and goes straight to the heart. Excuse me, Mr. Starkweather, but I never can think of that song without — I'm sure you will pardon me."

And what did that young hypocrite do but whip out his handkerchief and pretend to sop his dry eyes with it? The superintendent restrained his own emotions; but he secretly resolved that, dating from the beginning of the coming year, that youth should have an increase of salary.

"I think — ah — that you are correct regarding that song. I was about to say that I have no objections to your telling Mr. Midwood that when he is musically inclined, why — ah — perhaps it would be as well for him to indulge in that song; I believe you said it was 'Rawnee Swiver' or something similar."

"'Suwanee River,'" replied the youth with a sniffle, as he shoved his handkerchief back in his pocket. "I will tell him that, and would like to

say, if you will allow me, that you don't care how long he sticks to that tune."

"I will not object if it gives you pleasure — Gracious! what does that mean?"

It was Jack Midwood's burst of uproarious laughter which caused this astonished query on the part of Superintendent Starkweather.

CHAPTER II.

"HELP! HELP!"

THE mirth of Jack Midwood was so genuine, so unrestrained, and so loud, that Superintendent Starkweather came from his inner office, and, accompanied by the two employees, walked to the table of the chief operator with the inquiry, —

"Why, Mr. Midwood, what is the matter?"

"There's the oddest dispatch I ever received," he replied, holding up a piece of paper on which he had transcribed the message.

"It is from Blivens, at Grubb City. It struck me so queerly at first that I asked him to repeat; but there was no need of that, for he did it immediately, and would do it three or four times more if I hadn't begged him to wait. When I wrote it out and looked at it, I could hold in no longer. Look at it, please."

He handed it to the superintendent, who, with strange feelings, read the following message aloud: —

"For Heaven's sake, send me help at once. There is a grizzly bear as big as an elephant slamming up and down the platform, and I daren't shove my nose out-of-doors to signal the express.

If I don't get help quick I'll be eaten up, and there will be a thousand people killed by a collision. Help! help! the bear is now rubbing his shoulder against the corner of the building, and is shaking it so hard that, if he doesn't stop, it will tumble over and bury me in the ruins. Help! help! help!

BLIVENS."

"What in the world does it mean?" asked the superintendent, holding the telegram off at some distance, as he had not stopped to adjust his eyeglasses.

"Are there any grizzly bears in the neighborhood of Grubb City?" asked Midwood, restraining his mirth, as he rose to his feet and looked in the faces of the other three.

"I never heard of them; but a black bear is occasionally found in the woods and swamps around that place. One of them must have paid Blivens a visit — there he goes again!"

All four being expert operators, read by sound the frantic message which now made the instrument hum: —

"The bear has stopped scratching his shoulder, but the station-house is several feet out of plumb. If he scratches the other shoulder, nothing can save it and me. He is so big that he must weigh a ton. He has scented me, and is trying to poke his nose through the window. Can't you run a special down at once with a company of soldiers and two or three cannon? Help! Quick! BLIVENS."

By this time the absurdity of the thing struck the

others, and they joined in the merriment. But the superintendent was the first to recover. He saw there might be something serious after all back of this wild business.

"The young man is beside himself with fright," he remarked; "but evidently there is cause for his alarm. A bear has sauntered out from the woods, and he has locked himself in the station, afraid to venture out. This will never do."

"He speaks of the Thunderbolt express," said Victor; "that doesn't leave for fifteen minutes."

"Why doesn't he telegraph to Varick or Ashmont?" asked Opdyke; "both of those places are nearer than we are, and could send him help sooner."

"Like enough he has telegraphed to every point on the road, including Barmore. He may send a dispatch to the governor, asking him to call out the militia. There's no saying what a fellow in his state of mind will do — helloa! there he goes again!"

This was the bewildering message that was now ticked out as fast as possible: —

"The bear is rubbing his other shoulder against the corner of the station. He must have a terrible itching; but, thank Heaven, he is sawing against the opposite corner, and the building is working back to plumb. If he will only stop when he gets it there, I can hold out for a while. If he doesn't, over we go. Are you going to send help? If you don't, the next word

I send will be an account of my death, for the monster is determined to get at me. BLIVENS."

To keep the crazy fellow quiet, Midwood now telegraphed him to the effect that he had only to hold out for about an hour, when assistance would reach him.

"In the meantime," added the wag, "haven't you got any good ointment in the place? If so, pass it out to the bear, and let him rub himself with it. At all events, make friends with him, and don't let him suspect we intend to wipe him out."

"Midwood," said Superintendent Starkweather, "something must be done. Send word to Blivens forbidding him, in my name, to telegraph to any other point. Fortunately there are no trains due at Grubb City before the Thunderbolt, so there is no danger of the collision he has in mind. How would you like to go down there and straighten out matters?"

Young Midwood's eyes sparkled. He saw the prospect of some rare fun ahead.

"Nothing would suit me better."

"You haven't much time to spare. The train leaves in ten minutes. You will need to procure a good rifle and some ammunition."

"I think not," was the confident reply of the young man, who began doffing his office-coat and donning the one he wore on the street; "a revolver is good enough for that species of grizzly."

"I don't wish you to run too much risk," added the superintendent, who was very fond of the operator.

"This isn't the first time I have hunted bears," replied Midwood, who, being ready to pass out, sat down to the instrument for a minute or two to communicate with the panic-stricken Blivens.

"Help is about to leave, and will soon be there. Have you sent any appeal to any other point?"

"To only one person."

"Who is he?"

"President Stoddard, at Barmore."

"My gracious!" was the exclamation of the disgusted superintendent.

"What answer did you get?"

"His secretary replied that Mr. Stoddard is absent in Europe, and wanted to know whether I wished him to cable my message to him."

"What reply did you make?"

"I told him to do so by all means, and to rush it, for there is no time to lose."

Superintendent Starkweather sank into the nearest chair with a sigh, for words could not express his feelings.

"Have you received anything further?"

"Yes; the secretary tells me to take a mustard bath; I shall demand that he be discharged at once."

"Have you tried the ointment?"

"Haven't got any; what do I want any ointment for?"

"To give to grizzly bears when they begin rubbing their shoulders against the station. You ought always to keep a supply on hand. Why don't you telegraph the governor to call out the militia?"

"I'll be hanged if I don't!"

"No; wait till help gets to you. The superintendent forbids you positively to send any word elsewhere. Assistance will leave in a few minutes. What is the bear doing now?"

"Thinking."

"What about?"

"How should I know? Your questions strike me as irrelevant; did you ever stand in danger of death?"

"Not from a grizzly bear. Are you sure this isn't a lion or tiger or gorilla?"

The indignant Blivens refused to answer these frivolous questions; and as the Thunderbolt express had now steamed into the station, the smiling Midwood rose from his seat, bade his friends good-by, and, walking hastily out on the platform, mounted the engine, which was under the charge of his old friend Dick Devins, one of the veterans of the road.

"Dick," said he, seating himself on the fireman's side of the cab, "the superintendent has sent me to Grubb City on some particular business; you needn't slack up much to let me off."

"All right," replied the engineer, taking the cigar which Midwood passed to him.

"Now, 'Lige," he added, addressing the fireman, "if you can scare up a match, let's have a pull at the weed."

There is no engineer or fireman known who fails to carry a supply of lucifers with him. Jack Midwood smoked good cigars, and every employee was glad to have his company. He had plenty of matches as a matter of course; but when he passed a fine cigar to 'Lige Murphy, the fireman, he knew it would please the latter to do him that slight favor.

Midwood was a great smoker, that being the only weakness he was known to possess; and in a minute all three were puffing away as if in rivalry with the engine itself. The cigars were no more than fairly started when the flat gong over the head of the engineer gave out a sharp clang, he twitched the lever, Midwood pulled the bell-rope, and the Thunderbolt express set out on its run to Barmore, just ninety miles to the eastward.

It was a clear sunshiny day in early autumn, the weather being of the most delightful character, and just the kind for Ned Midwood to enjoy a ride on the engine to the fullest extent. Besides, what a prospect of fun ahead!

CHAPTER III.

RE-ENFORCEMENTS FOR GRUBB CITY.

WHILE Jack Midwood is traveling as fast as steam can carry him to the relief of the terrified telegraph operator at Grubb City, a few words of explanation must be given.

The Wareton, Grubb City, & National Railway, ninety miles in length, followed a winding course through a new and undeveloped country to Barmore, whence connection was secured with one of the main lines leading to the metropolis of the country. The nearest station to Grubb City on the west (that is the direction of Wareton) was Varick, fifteen miles distant. The first station on the east was Ashmont, twenty miles away.

At Grubb City the Parego & Barmore line joined it. This was a small concern, whose single track was only twenty-eight miles long. The town of Parego, from which it started, lay to the northward of Grubb City.

The main line consisted of a single track, though there had been talk for several years of laying another. The truth was, the line, as well as the connecting branch, was the result of a tremendous boom in rail-

way matters some time before. Most of its course was through a wild, unsettled section; and had the corporation not been taken in hand by several of the great railway magnates in New York, it must have gone into the hands of a receiver. Its prospects were brightening, and it was certain to become a valuable franchise in the near future.

One of the most enthusiastic promoters, or boomers, fixed upon several acres of land, where the branch line joined the main stem, as the site of one of the great cities of the future. True, it was a "howling wilderness," and the nearest dwelling was between two and three miles distant; but the climate was healthful, there was an abundance of water, and, with the new railway facilities, it ought to become a great place. All that was needed was to convince others of the fact.

The plot of land was surveyed and laid out; the railway lent its help to advertising the unrivaled attractions of the new town, and carried visitors to and fro without charge. Quite a number went to the place, looked the ground over, shook their heads, said they would think about it, went away, and are still thinking.

Not a solitary person had the hardihood to buy a building-lot and erect a house, even on the favorable terms offered. Its rather uneuphonious name was in honor of the gentleman who originated the enterprise,

and possibly it had something to do with keeping pioneers away.

Thus it was that the ambitious town of Grubb City consisted of a single dwelling, which was that of the railway station. There the solitary telegraph operator lived alone, looking after the signals made necessary at the junction of the two lines, and receiving and sending such messages as were required. He had a lonely existence, relieved by occasional visits to Varick, Ashmont, and more rarely to the prosperous towns of Barmore and Wareton.

It need hardly be said that Grubb City was the most undesirable post on the line of the W. G. C. & N. Railroad. Only necessity could lead one to accept it, and the incumbent from the first day sighed for a chance to leave.

John R. Blivens, the hero of the astounding telegrams, was a big countryman, who started out with the idea of ultimately becoming the president of some railway, he wasn't particular which. When he had mastered telegraphy he applied to Superintendent Starkweather, who offered him the situation at Grubb City. He gladly took it; for he was certain that he would not have to stay long before the company would recognize his worth, and transfer him to one of the most responsible situations in the service.

He had been on duty a couple of months, acquit-

ting himself fairly well, for his work was not difficult, and had already intimated to the superintendent that it was nearly time for him to assume charge of one of the principal offices at Wareton or Barmore. The superintendent told him to keep at work until some suitable opening presented itself. He was still young, only nineteen, and must not become impatient.

Accordingly Blivens, big, strong, and somewhat ponderous, returned to his post, saying to himself,—

"He's jealous of me, that's all. He's afraid when I once get started I'll bounce him out of his place. But hold on! I'll make the fur fly as soon as I get the chance."

Meanwhile Jack Midwood was spinning along the railway toward Grubb City, enjoying to the full the novel sensation of sitting in the cab of the locomotive, and watching the sweep of the rails under the whirling drivers, the rapid play of the connecting-rod, the darting back of the trees, and occasionally a dwelling at the side of the track.

After passing Varick, the run of fifteen miles to Grubb City remained. There was no reason to fear that anything was on the track; and looking across to the young man, Dick Devins nodded to him to take his place at the throttle. This was contrary to all rules; but Midwood, who had often ridden on the engine, and who longed for an experience of the

kind, stepped across the cab with a smile, seated himself on the cushion of the engineer, and rested his hand on the lever just as if he had been accustomed to it all his life.

"I'll keep an eye on you," remarked Devins, standing directly behind him, "and see that you don't run off the track."

"Thank you; I'll try to steer straight," replied the young man, who had scarcely settled himself in place when he encountered a startling experience.

They were rounding a curve at that moment, with a stretch of woods on one side so that one could not see far. The speed was slightly slackened, probably being about forty miles an hour, when, as more of the track swept into sight, a cow was seen standing directly between the rails, with her head toward the engine — the worst position, since there is always danger of her "doubling up" under the pilot and derailing the locomotive.

The animal was too close for the train to be stopped, though it was possible to decrease the speed considerably. Devins started to take charge of the engine, when Midwood anticipated him, doing the very thing he had in mind. He shut off steam and applied the air-brakes in a twinkling. Then the reversing-rod was flung over, and the steam partially admitted into the cylinders; not to the extent of causing the drivers

to revolve, or even to stand stationary, but so as to turn them at the highest point of resistance.

This is the perfection of a difficult point in railroading, and what every competent engineer does under similar circumstances.

The common belief that an engineer instantly reverses his engine in the face of sudden danger is in error; for to do so incurs the risk of blowing out the cylinder heads. The shutting off of the steam takes place before reversal, that following immediately with the admission of steam into the cylinders, and the rigid application of the brakes.

The astonished engineer stood still and said nothing. The stupid cow kept her place between the rails, staring at the monster, despite the screaming of the whistle and ringing of the bell, attended to respectively by the engineer and fireman.

Just before reaching her, she lowered her head, switched her tail, and stepped off the track. Then she looked at the engine again, now almost upon her, and started to return; but Midwood had been expecting the movement, and the moment she was out of the way he released the brakes, threw the reversing-rod partly over, and admitted a full head of steam. The engine bounded forward like a race-horse, and puffed past the cow before she could get in front of it; but she came so near doing so that

she received a bump from the corner of the pilot, and would have gone under the wheels but for Midwood's promptness in sending the engine in advance of her.

"Good for you!" exclaimed the delighted Devins; "there isn't an engineer on the road that can beat you running."

"Get out!" laughed the youth; "I was always fond of cow's milk, and have studied the animal from childhood. There are a hundred things about a locomotive of which I know nothing."

"It wouldn't take you more than half an hour to learn the whole business."

"I'll let you take charge now," said the pleased Midwood, resigning the lever to the engineer. "If any more cows show up, why, I'll help you out; but if they are horses, I daren't try it."

A few minutes later they struck a straight piece of track, and the little building at Grubb City was descried in the distance. Midwood had given no intimation of his errand, but he peered ahead on the watch to discover what he could. Since the branch road joined the main line at this point, it was the duty of operator and station agent Blivens to display the white signal, indicating that everything was right. The round white globe was visible a long way off, so that but for the necessity of dropping Midwood

at this point, Devins would have rattled over the switches with his speed very little if any diminished.

"You needn't slow up much," said the young man, standing just behind the engineer; "I know how to jump off."

"Don't you try it till I give you the word! There's nothing so deceiving as the speed of a train of cars. It has caused the death of hundreds of persons. I'll slow down right opposite the platform."

"That will answer."

"Just wait where you are. I will come down to about half this rate, and then you must be careful — Great heavens!"

Jack Midwood had leaped off. The startled engineer thrust his head out of the cab and looked back. He saw the young man run rapidly several yards, then come to a standstill, and laughingly wave his hand toward him.

"Well, I'm blessed if he doesn't get me!" exclaimed the astonished engineer, waving his hand in return, giving a salutation from the whistle, and increasing the pace of the engine; "some folks are born smarter than all creation, and he's one of 'em, while I ain't."

When the train had shot past, Midwood stepped back between the rails, because the walking was better there than down the bank, and resumed his approach to the station, less than one hundred yards away. As

he did so, he took out his revolver and carefully examined it. It was one of the finest make, and every chamber was loaded. Enough has been said to show that he knew how to handle it.

"I've got some extra cartridges in my pocket," he mused; "but I don't think I'll need them, unless there should be several grizzly bears prowling around. The station isn't tipped over yet, though I don't know but that it is a little out of plumb. I wonder whether Bruin has got through scratching himself."

Matters had a curious look to say the least; for the building was closed tightly, and there was no sign of a living person or animal to be seen about it. Holding his weapon grasped in his right hand, Midwood ascended the few steps at the end of the long, narrow platform, and had not gone a dozen paces when he plunged headlong into the most stirring experience of his life.

CHAPTER IV.

A RESIGNATION.

THE long, narrow platform at the Grub City station extended to the east and west of the little structure in which the agent made his home, the building being somewhat nearer the western end, where Jack Midwood ascended the steps and walked forward.

Reaching the door, he turned the knob; but it was locked and would not open. He hammered on it with his fist.

"Helloa, Blivens! are you in there? It isn't the grizzly, I pledge you my word. I am the commander-in-chief of the forces sent to your help; let me in that we may consult how to place the cannon."

He pounded and called again, but there was no response.

"I guess he's adjourned *sine die*," mused the visitor; "but I don't believe he's far off. I'll look farther. I do hope the bear hasn't also adjourned."

He hadn't.

Midwood stepped briskly around the corner of the building, still walking on the platform, when he struck

his toe against the snout of an enormous black bear, and tumbled headlong over him.

Bruin, having nosed around to his content, had stretched out on the sunny side of the little building, and was snoozing, with his nose within a few inches of the corner. With no thought of anything of the kind, Midwood ran directly upon him. Nimble as he was, he could not check himself in time, but struck the brute fairly between the eyes with the toe of his boot, and pitched over his great shaggy back.

The young man was a marvel of coolness; but he never was more startled in all his life, as he might well be. He cut a ridiculous figure as, in his effort to recover himself, his derby flew off, and he fell on his hands and one knee. Not only that, but he dropped his revolver, and did not dare to stop to pick it up.

The *ursa* species are of a sluggish nature, but they can move quickly when they wish. The specimen so rudely disturbed uttered a savage growl, came to his feet in a twinkling, and made straight for the youth.

It was no time to think of dignity. Jack Midwood never ran faster than he did when he made the circuit of the station building with the savage brute at his heels; but by the time he was fairly underway, his coolness came back, and he felt that if he was not master of the situation he soon would be.

The bear could travel fully as swiftly as he. In fact, he was going faster; and if the struggle should settle down to a simple trial of speed, the brute was sure to win.

At the rear of the building stood a truck, such as are used at all railroad stations. The fugitive bounded over it, and then, grasping one handle, swung the thing around, so as to interpose it across the path of his pursuer. Midwood supposed it would retard his flight to some extent, but it did not. He vaulted over it as cleverly as if he had been practicing all his life, and came on with renewed ardor.

It will be understood that, inasmuch as the race led around the building, only a few seconds passed when the contestants came back to their starting-point, the young man being the first to reach it. As he darted past the corner once more, he saw his revolver lying where he had dropped it a few moments before.

"I don't think I will let you have that," he muttered, "for you might take a crack at me with it. The hat can wait."

The next instant he whirled like lightning, leveled the weapon, and as the huge head of his pursuer swung into view, he let fly with three chambers in quick succession. The bear sagged over backward and partly to one side, and became as dead as Julius Cæsar.

And why shouldn't he? for every one of those lead

pellets had crashed through his brain. What creature can stand up under that sort of thing?

Jack Midwood picked up his derby, flipped off some specks of dirt, dusted his clothes with his handkerchief, shoved his revolver back in his pocket, and then took out a cigar, and lighted it.

"Considered strictly as a bear," he muttered, surveying the motionless body before him, "I don't think you are of much account. *Hæc fabula docet* that bears should stay in the woods, and not poke around the property of the W. G. C. & N. I wonder what has become of Blivens. That creature is a pretty big one, that's certain. Can it be that any of his bulk is due to Blivens? He don't look as if he had swallowed a station agent lately."

Midwood now heard some one moving inside the building. He waited and listened. In the stillness the slightest noise was audible. A sound showed that the door was gently unlocked. Then came a pause. After a while the door slowly opened a few inches; but being around the corner of the structure, the one within could not see the carcass of the bear nor the young man, nor could the latter observe him.

Several more minutes passed without a stir. Then the door was opened farther, and Blivens stepped stealthily forth, tip-toed to the corner, where he

came face to face with the smiling Midwood, who nodded his head, and called out,

"How are you, Bliv?"

No painter could depict the expression on the face of the young man when he comprehended what had taken place. The look of terror which had sat there so long was mingled with that of amazement. When it was established to his satisfaction that his terrible enemy was dead, and that consequently all danger was over, he became something like himself. He invited his visitor inside, and the two sat down on the long bench which ran around three sides of the interior.

"Are you the only chap that came to help me?" inquired Blivens.

"Am I not enough?" asked Midwood in return.

"Wal, I 'spose you are, since you was lucky enough to shoot that grizzly."

"He isn't any more of a grizzly than you are, Bliv; those animals, as you ought to know, are not found in this part of the world."

"Where do they belong?"

"On the Pacific Coast."

"Couldn't one of 'em emigrate to these parts?"

"Not very well; he would have to travel a part of the way on the railroads, seeing the distance is about three thousand miles, and I don't believe this one had any money to pay his fare."

"He might have busted out of some menagerie."

"The kind of grizzly bears the menageries have don't break out; they have too good a thing where they are. No, Bliv, this is one of the ordinary black bears that are occasionally found in the woods around here."

"You don't mean to tell me there's more of 'em!" exclaimed the young man.

"It is reasonable to suppose that where you find one running wild like this, there are others. Yes; I've no doubt there are plenty in the neighborhood."

"By jiminy! then I'm going to resign. This is no place for me anyway; I've been here long enough; it's time I was promoted; I'm going to tell Starkweather that."

"Why don't you buy a gun, and spend a part of your time hunting bears?"

"Why don't I? 'Cause I'm too afeard I might find 'em."

"Why, Bliv, what's that?"

The eye of the astonished visitor at that moment rested on a double-barreled shotgun leaning against the wall in the corner of the little room. He rose, walked over, and picked it up. A moment's scrutiny told him that both barrels were loaded.

"Why in the name of the seven wonders didn't you try this on the bear, instead of telegraphing for help?"

With a foolish expression, Blivens replied, —

"I forgot all about that! And there it sot all the time that bear was scaring me out of a year's growth. Ain't it funny how such things slip your mind?"

"Rather," was the dry response of Midwood; "you might have blown his head off with that, but you will remember next time. That reminds me that I promised to telegraph to Mr. Starkweather the result of the expedition for your relief."

The two passed behind the narrow space which served as the inner office, and Midwood sat down before the instrument. The presence of his friend at his elbow could not wholly restrain his waggish propensities.

"The bear is dead," ran the telegram, "and Blivens is alive, so you need not call on the governor for troops. The siege is raised, but Blivens is afraid there are more bears in the woods. What shall we do about it?"

"See here," said the agent, "while you are at the key add something more."

"All right; you may dictate, and I'll send."

"Tell him I resign; that I demand — don't say I ask — a situation in the office at Wareton, one suitable to my ability."

The dispatch was forwarded, and the reply was equally prompt, —

"Say to Mr. Blivens that I have the situation exactly suited to his capacity. It is that of carrying in coal and keeping up the fires. Wire me at once if he accepts."

"Humph! that settles it!" exclaimed the indignant Blivens; "I go on the next train."

"But you must stay until your successor can come."

"I'll leave that for you to attend to," growled Blivens, striding out of the door and slamming it after him.

CHAPTER V.

A LATE CALL.

It looked as if the joke was on Midwood, for Blivens refused to be persuaded. The unfortunate declaration of the visitor that other bears were in the neighborhood was undoubtedly the cause of his haste. He offered to stay a couple of days if Midwood would keep him company; but as that would not have helped matters, so far as they affected the caller, he told him he might go as soon as he chose.

Accordingly Blivens gathered his effects together, and several hours later boarded the up train, which stopped at all the way-stations, and bade good-by to the scene of the greatest scare of his life. Midwood telegraphed the situation to the superintendent, saying that he would stay until a successor was appointed, and adding that there was no call for haste, since he would enjoy a few days in the woods. He didn't explain that he was anxious to get a chance at some of the game, even though Blivens had taken away his large weapon and he was left with only his revolver.

There were so many hours of leisure at Grubb City

that Midwood was confident he could secure a good deal of enjoyment in rambling through the dense forest and acquiring strength and health, even if he didn't catch sight of many wild animals. He begged his friend Victor to ship him a box of cigars, as he could get along for a few days with what clothing he had brought, and the supplies in the way of food were never forgotten by the railway authorities. He added a postscript that he had a strong hope of being able to sell a ticket before he left, since the average was about three a month, and there hadn't been any disposed of for a couple of weeks.

Thus came about Jack Midwood's temporary transfer to the lonely station of Grubb City, and with it an experience of which he no more dreamed than he did of taking a journey to Central Africa. On seemingly the most trivial circumstances sometimes hinge the important events of one's life.

It was dark when Blivens took his departure, and no more trains were due until the night express eastward bound passed through at 10.30. That met the night express in the opposite direction at Grubb City Junction, after which the road remained clear until morning, since all the freight was carried in several cars attached to the accommodation trains, which made the trip during the daytime only.

Left alone, Midwood proceeded to make himself at

home in his characteristic way. Blivens had told him all that was necessary; and being familiar with the schedule of the road, his duty as regarded the signals was too plain to require instruction. Whatever cooking was required he had to do for himself, and enough has been said of the versatility of the young man for the reader to know that he was not likely to meet with any difficulty in that line.

As the night advanced, it became so chilly that he started a fire in the cylinder stove in the middle of the outer room, but got along with a cold lunch and a cup of coffee, which was easily prepared over the stove. Not anticipating anything like what had taken place, he failed to make preparation for a stay of more than a few hours, so that he was without reading-matter, and what caused him dismay, had only a half-dozen cigars with him.

"Gracious!" he muttered, "if Victor forgets me, I'm gone; I'll keep the wires hot to-morrow morning till I know they're on the way."

The two express-trains met and passed on schedule time, and at last Midwood felt he was deserted. So long as a train was due, he had a feeling something like that caused by the expectation of company, but now he anticipated seeing no human face before the sun rose.

"I can feel for Alexander Selkirk," he reflected,

after setting the signals and seeing that everything was right, "though he had it a little worse than I, for he couldn't tell when the thing would end, and I know there are not likely to be many more hours."

It was a good time for retiring; but he was not accustomed to sleeping so early, and the air was so clear and bracing that he enjoyed the stroll up and down the platform. He decided to light another cigar and smoke it, before turning in for the night, as he paced back and forth the length of the structure.

The situation could not have been more dismal. The great, silent woods stretched on every hand, solemn, dark, and with a hollow roar at times, like the voice of the ocean in the distance. Now and then the gentle wind stirred the branches of the trees with a soft, mournful sighing, and once he fancied he caught the faint whistle of a locomotive many miles away.

There was no moon; and the stars, though bright, shed out but a faint light upon the scene. The small lamp over the entrance to the station threw a silent glare on the rails immediately in front; but they only served to make the darkness of the woods more impressive by contrast. The carcass of the bear lay where it had fallen, and Midwood had speculated as to what was best to do with it. He

decided that on the morrow he would remove the skin, and preserve it as a memento of his adventure. The flesh could be taken away on the truck so as to prevent any annoyance from it.

The young man paced the length of the platform perhaps a dozen times, when the suspicion came to him that he was not alone. He had not as yet seen any one; but several faint sounds which caught his ear once or twice convinced him that there was either a man or animal somewhere about the station, and that whichever it was, he was giving considerable attention to Midwood himself.

Such a belief or fancy is enough to make any one nervous; and brave as the young man unquestionably was, he would have wished himself somewhere else but for the fact that he had his partly loaded revolver at command.

"I wonder if it can be the co-partner of that bear," he mused, stopping at the lower end of the platform, and listening and peering into the gloom. "Hardly; for if it was, he would proceed directly to business, whatever that business might be. If it was a dog or other beast, attracted by the scent of the carcass, he would do the same; but there has been no living creature near the body since I have been walking on the platform. I believe it's a man."

Midwood now decided to resort to a little artifice

in order to solve the mystery. He walked slowly toward the building, his step regular and somewhat heavy, so that any one listening was sure to hear it. All the time, as may be supposed, he used his ears and eyes for all they were worth. He kept his hand on his weapon, for he didn't intend that any one should "get the drop" on him.

The question presented itself as to why any one should wish to hurt him or to watch his footsteps. He was not aware of having an enemy in the world, and the idea of any one expecting to find the station worth robbing caused a smile.

"I don't think there's a dollar and a half worth of plunder in the establishment; and the most valuable things about me are those cigars, and, by gracious, the fellow that confiscates them has got to fight."

He strode to the end of the platform, his senses on the alert, and glanced into the front window of the office as he passed. He saw nothing amiss, and turned to continue his promenade with the same slow, measured tread.

Half-way down the platform once more, he wheeled like a flash and faced the other way.

As he did so he saw him.

There could be no mistake about it. A man dodged behind the corner of the building. He was quick;

but the movement of Midwood was quicker, and also unexpected.

The first feeling of the young man after making the discovery was that of anger. What business had any one to be prowling about the station in that way? If his errand was legitimate, why this stealthy work?

"I'll make him show his colors," muttered Midwood, drawing his revolver and retracing his steps; but doing so with care, for there was something singular about the whole business.

To his amazement he saw, while yet a couple of rods away from the door, the form of a person, who turned the knob and was about to enter.

"Halt!" called Midwood, "or I'll put a bullet through you!"

As he uttered this startling command he bounded lightly forward for several paces, and added, —

"Up with your hands!"

The fellow who was thus halted on the very threshold was villanous looking. He turned around with a contemptuous leer and growled, without any motion to obey the command, —

"What's the matter with you, sonny? Don't make so much noise, or I'll wring your neck!"

Crack! rang out the revolver on the night air, and the bullet nipped the miscreant's right ear.

"Now I'll clip a piece off of the left ear," said Midwood, doing so with neatness and dispatch; "and then if your hands don't go up I'll send the third right through your ugly face."

"Great thunder! Ain't my hands up?" growled the terrified stranger, reaching toward the sky as if trying to draw down something a dozen feet over his head.

"Well, now, as you've got them up, you can put them down again," added the young conqueror. "I'm not afraid of you; walk inside if you want to, and help yourself to a seat. I'll follow, but don't try any tricks."

The fellow was cunning. He took a quick step through the door, his evident intention being to secure a second's protection against the youth's aim, during which he could whip out his own revolver and in turn get the "drop" on him.

But Midwood was alert. He whisked in so close behind the stranger that the latter had no chance to try anything of the kind. With the best grace possible he slouched to one of the two vacant chairs on the other side of the stove, while the other sat down facing him. The room was dimly illuminated by the oil lamp overhead.

Naturally, when the two confronted each other, they engaged in mutual study. The stranger was in middle

life, with a keen, piercing gray eye and jet black hair and mustache. It was plain, however, that the latter hue was due to dye and not to nature.

He was fairly well dressed, but looked like a man addicted to dissipation and riotous living. He was tall, slim, and evidently possessed of great strength, or had been at one time. Those who lead such lives as his cannot retain strength and health for any extended period.

"Now that you're here," said Midwood in the most quiet manner imaginable, "I want to know what you meant by sneaking around the station as you did."

"Who are you?" asked the other gruffly.

"I don't know as that is any business of yours, but for the present you may consider me Inspector Byrnes of New York. You haven't answered my question."

"I was looking for the other fellow — that big country lumpkin that was here yesterday."

"Why didn't you come forward then? You had plenty of chances to see it wasn't he, for he is nearly double my size."

"Yes, that is so; but I didn't know but what something had made you shrink."

Midwood laughed.

"That's the best answer you could make. I'm almost sorry I didn't send the first ball through your skull, for I've no doubt you are an escaped convict and ought

to be in jail. Your face is about the meanest I ever looked on, and I've seen a good many mean ones in my time."

"I don't see what right you have to speak of a stranger that way," replied the other in an aggrieved voice; "you never met me before."

"Don't be too sure of that."

This also was in the nature of a bluff; and it took, for on the instant the man demanded, —

"Where?"

"Never mind; I'm not on the witness-stand. Your presence here is proof against you."

"What sort of proof?"

"That you have come for no good."

"But I have come on business.

CHAPTER VI.

WHO WAS THE CALLER?

"WHAT is your business?" asked Midwood of his strange visitor.

"I want to send a telegram to Wareton."

"It's too late to do so this evening; come around in the morning."

"Couldn't you get it through for me to-night?"

"I suppose I might, but I sha'n't. It's so late that you'll oblige me now by leaving, as I want to close up."

The man looked at him sharply for a moment or two, and then rose to his feet.

"Well, you're the coolest one I ever saw!"

And with this parting remark, and without either bidding the other good-night, he passed out the door, and moved along the platform in the direction of the highway, until his footsteps were heard no more.

When he was beyond hearing, Midwood drew several cartridges from his pocket, and carefully re-loaded each chamber of his revolver.

"I must learn to follow the hunter's motto of always loading my gun when it is discharged before doing anything else."

During his entire interview, after firing his two shots, with the desperado, as he was convinced the man was, Jack had not a single charge in his weapon; and the young man knew it. There were coolness and nerve for you!

The lower floor of the small building, of course, was provided with windows, which had no shutters; but across the panes on the outside extended a number of strong iron bars, as is seen in places of confinement. It was these which had prevented the bear entering by that means; though had he entertained any such wish (which is doubtful), he would have found it a tight squeeze to force his huge body through. All Midwood had to do, therefore, was to lock the door, ascend the few steps to the loft, and stretch out on the simple cot provided for the official at the station.

But before doing so he lit another cigar, and did some thinking.

He was a level-headed young man; and the more he reflected over the situation, or rather the incidents of the evening, the clearer became several dim suspicions which had shaped themselves during his interview with his unwelcome visitor.

In the first place he was satisfied that the stranger had no sinister designs regarding himself. In such cases a motive must exist, and there was none here.

There was no conceivable reason why the man should wish to harm him, and there was nothing specially suspicious in his attempting to enter the building as he did. If he wanted to send a dispatch, that was the natural and the only thing to do.

But it was his actions previous to that which justified the abrupt course of the young man. He had been prowling around the platform for at least a quarter of an hour before Midwood located him and called him to account.

What was his business there? and where did he come from?

Unquestionably he expected to meet Blivens, and was surprised to find a stranger in his place. He probably spent the time named in stealthily studying the face and appearance of the new agent, with a view to decide how to approach him. This was Midwood's theory; though he felt that if such was his object, the simplest course would have been for him to disarm suspicion by coming boldly forward and interviewing him. Doubtless his skulking was preliminary to that step.

And what business could he have with Blivens? The sending of the dispatch was not the only one; for, in that event, he would not have cared if another operator sent it. There must be some other reason.

That he was a ruffian, Midwood never doubted from the moment he gained a view of his countenance. He was one of those "crooks" whose proper place is behind bars. But it was hard to believe that the big, hulking Blivens, who was scared out of his senses by the appearance of a bear, had anything criminal in his nature, or that he could be persuaded knowingly to violate the law, even in a slight respect.

"I wouldn't want to tell Bliv to his face that he has room to rent in his upper story, but it is the lamentable fact. He isn't bright; his actions, not only this afternoon, but ever since he has been in the employ of the W. G. C. & N., prove it. This fellow meant to use him as a dupe. He will try the same thing on me to-morrow. I hope he will. I wish I knew how to communicate with Bliv; but he didn't leave me his address, though his home is in Wareton."

As to where the stranger came from, it was natural to suppose he had dropped off of one of the express-trains, when they stopped at the junction that night, and kept in the background until they had been some time out of the way.

Jack Midwood was pretty clear in his reasoning; but on this point, at least subsequent events proved he was wrong.

It will be recalled that, during his talk with the visitor, he intimated that he had seen him before, or knew, at least, something about him. This was not the empty boast that it may seem; for that countenance gave Jack a thrill of memory, and at first he was sure this was not the first time they had looked in each other's face. But, as the talk continued, he concluded that the resemblance was only one of those accidental ones which all of us have noticed.

Now, however, when he was once more alone, the fancy, if it were that, returned, and grew into certain belief.

"I know I have met him before to-night," he muttered, leaning back in his chair and sending a puff of smoke toward the ceiling; "but where the mischief was it? It's queer I can't recall it."

He was provoked at the lapse of memory. He rose and paced back and forth across the small room; but the quarters were too confined to allow him to think freely, and unlocking the door, he passed out on the platform, and began walking slowly the length of it, as he had done earlier in the evening.

"It would be easy for that fellow to pick me off," he reflected, as he stalked forward in the starlight, "and he may be still prowling near; but he doesn't want to hurt me; there isn't any one that is anxious

to do that just now, though there's no saying how soon such a fellow will turn up."

It may seem strange that the young man felt no misgiving as he strolled along the platform in the starlight, where not long before he had discovered an ill-favored stranger dogging his footsteps; but such was the fact. Clear, cold reasoning had convinced the youth he was right, and he did not even rest his hand on his unerring revolver at his hip.

The more Midwood reflected, the stronger became the belief that some mischief was afoot; but it was impossible to form any satisfactory theory as to its nature. The stranger's presence at this late hour in this lonely spot was for no good. He did want to send a telegram, there was little doubt of that; and the young man regretted that he did not take it from him, for it would have given him a foundation on which to build an explanation of the tantalizing mystery.

Blivens's home was in Wareton, where his parents were well to do; and Midwood decided to telegraph him early in the morning, making inquiries about the stranger who had recently called on him. If the ambitious young man would give a truthful account of what was said (and what reason was there for him to decline?) it would be a great help to the other in finding a key to the problem which just now was beyond his solving.

"I don't see that I can gain anything by turning the matter over in my mind without something more substantial to reason upon," he concluded; "it is now past midnight, and I ought to be asleep."

He walked rapidly back to the station building, extinguished the light burning overhead, passed into the door, locked it behind him, and seeing that everything was right, with the lamp inside turned low, he ascended the few steps communicating with the upper story and entered his diminutive sleeping apartment.

He was still in the fog as concerned the incidents of the evening, and resolved to think no more about it. It was a favorite practice with him when in college, and puzzled by some abstruse problem, to "sleep over it," which is a good scheme with all the troublous matters of life. The brain seems to possess an occult power of reasoning while at rest, and the experience of many persons will recall the number of times this recourse has made clear the most tangled labyrinth.

The fact is especially true as regards the working of memory. Who has not lain down totally at a loss to recall the name or identity of some one, and found the answer awaiting him when he opened his eyes again?

So it proved in this instance. Midwood soon sank into a refreshing slumber, which continued until the

sun appeared in the east. Then he opened his eyes, and before rising from his couch, he uttered one exclamation, —

"Eureka! I have found it."

He had solved the problem. He knew the identity of his caller of the evening before.

Sitting on the edge of the couch, he thoughtfully scratched his head and said to himself, —

"And now, by gracious! I know there is some villainy afoot!"

This time the young man was right.

CHAPTER VII.

AN AMERICAN CITIZEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT.

THERE was nothing to engage the attention of Jack Midwood for a couple of hours after finishing his morning meal, since no trains were due until nine o'clock. He therefore seated himself at the key; and knowing the precise minute almost when Victor and Opdyke would reach the main office, he opened communication with them.

His first inquiry was concerning the cigars, of which he had only a couple left. The reply was satisfactory: they would leave Wareton on the 7.30, and were due at Grubb City at nine by the accommodation. Could Midwood hold out until then? He replied that he would do his best, and returned his acknowledgments.

His next inquiry was whether they would deliver a dispatch to Blivens, who, he believed, was in Wareton. The reply, of course, was that it would be done if he was at home.

This telegram was clicked out, addressed to John R. Blivens: —

"What do you know about a tall, thin man, with black mustache and hair, who called last evening at the station to see you? Please wire me at once. "MIDWOOD."

"I might have given the fellow's name," thought the sender, as he tipped his chair back, elevated his feet on the small table, and slowly puffed his cigar; "but he wouldn't recognize it. A year ago, when I visited the State penitentiary, the keeper pointed out Mugg Voorhes as one of the most desperate burglars and criminals in the place. He then had light hair and no beard; but all the same, it was he who honored me with a call last evening. He isn't in this part of the country for any good."

The answer which Mr. Blivens returned to the inquiry of Midwood had the merit of being unexpected. Evidently he felt sore over the business of the preceding day, for his curt reply ran: —

"None of your business."

Midwood laughed.

"I don't know that I blame him, for I did have a good deal of fun at his expense. I suppose, after relating what took place to his friends, he has seen what a dunce he made of himself."

Superintendent Starkweather did not come to his office until nine o'clock, which was after the arrival of the first down train at Grubb City, and also from Parego, on the branch line. Midwood asked Victor to say that he wished to have a talk with him as soon as convenient.

The gentleman arrived punctually, closely followed

by President Thornton of the First National Bank of Wareton. After his departure, on learning of Midwood's request, the superintendent seated himself at his own key, for he was an expert operator. The messages which passed back and forth may as well be given in the form of a conversation, for such they really were.

"I am convinced that some mischief is afoot, but am unable to learn what it is without something more definite to work upon," was the first message sent by Midwood, after the greeting between them.

"In what way can I assist you?" inquired the superintendent.

"I cannot even tell that at present; but one of the worst men in the State called on me at the station last night, under the pretense that he wanted to send a dispatch."

"Did he do so?"

"No; I put him off with the excuse that it was too late. He said he would come round this morning; but he has not shown up yet."

"On what do you base your suspicion that some wrong doing is intended?"

"On the character of the man more than anything else; I saw him a year ago in the penitentiary, and know he is one of the worst of his kind. He must have got out lately."

"It seems to me, then, that the only thing you can do is to wait till he comes, and keep an eye on him. Be careful, for he may mean you bodily harm."

"There is no fear of that, for he has nothing to gain by anything of that nature."

The conversation had progressed thus far when a thought came to Midwood like an inspiration.

"Do you know whether it is the intention of any one to ship any large amount of money in this direction very soon?"

The question took the superintendent aback, evidently; for several minutes passed before he replied by another inquiry, —

"Why do you ask me that?"

"I trust you do not think I would do so without a good reason."

"My answer, then, is, 'Yes.'"

"Kindly give me the particulars."

"I must decline to do so."

One of Jack Midwood's traits was a quick temper, which, however, he generally held under good control; but in the present instance he was angered. Like a flash he sent the reply, —

"All right; good-day."

He was tempted to say to the superintendent, that inasmuch as Mugg Voorhes probably knew about the intended shipment, that was sufficient, without letting

him into the secret; but that would have been disrespectful, and he said nothing.

"I now believe there is a scheme on foot to hold up the train with the money, and if I had been trusted I could have helped defeat the effort; but I have been snubbed, and they may now do as they please about it."

And with this conclusion he dropped his feet with a bang on the floor, and lit one of the new consignment of cigars.

It was all very well for him to jump to such a decision; but he was not the kind of man to be satisfied with himself, and he felt uneasy, just as one does when he tries to shirk a plain duty.

"I know the obligations which the superintendent is under, but he ought to be able to discriminate. I wish my old acquaintance, Mugg Voorhes, would give me a call, and — by George, there he comes!"

But the young man was mistaken. The heavy step on the platform was not that of the ex-convict. When the door opened, it admitted an individual without the least resemblance to him. The newcomer was a huge negro, dressed in gorgeous array, with a tall silk hat, a flaming necktie, and an immense brass chain dangling from his waist. But for the fact that his enormous patent leathers and his turned-up trousers showed that he had been tramping a long distance, he might have been supposed to have just emerged from a fancy

ball or a cake-walk. His big eyes, open mouth, and shiny ebon countenance were the picture of wonderment, as he stood with one hand on the inner door-knob and himself half-way in the room, evidently in doubt whether to enter or not.

Jack Midwood's feelings underwent a revulsion as he looked at the visitor. He came from behind the railing and solemnly extended his hand.

"I am glad to see you. How are you to-day?"

The African took the hand somewhat gingerly, and with another step which brought him inside, asked, —

"Has Cato Hulfish been hyah dis morning?"

"I haven't seen him."

"I's looking for dat darkey; him and me has a little dispoot which I'm anxious to settle in de highest style ob de art."

And his huge hand slipped from the door-knob, and seemed instinctively to reach toward his hip pocket.

"In what way has Mr. Hulfish offended you?" asked Midwood, trying to maintain a grave countenance.

"He's been interfering wid my constitootional rights; he's been fooling round Miss Priscilla Smith, de young cullud lady dat am engaged to me."

"Sit down, and tell me about it," said Midwood in his kindest manner; for a thousand dollars wouldn't have tempted him to let such a chance as this slip by unimproved.

The negro, who was somewhat tired from his long tramp, dropped heavily upon the bench back of the stove, took off his shiny hat, pulled out a handkerchief fully a yard in area, and colored with all the hues of the rainbow. He drew this round his tile several times, and then mopped off his forehead on which the perspiration was abundant. Then he flung one leg over the other, and looking sideways at the young man who was standing near him, said, —

"I presoom you doesn't know Cato Hulfish?"

"I am sorry to say I haven't the honor of his acquaintance."

"Humph! yo doesn't want to know him. Signs hisself 'P. Cato Hulfish;' but dem as knows him calls him 'Old Bald Eagle.'"

"Why is that?"

"'Cause he am bald as the back ob my hand, and homely! Wal, yo' jes' want ter seen him once, and den yo' would lay down and die for fear yo' might look on him agin. He am a nightmare."

"And what sort of taste has Miss Priscilla Smith to prefer such a person to a fine, handsome young man like you?"

"Stop dat!" interrupted the visitor in some excitement; "don't cast no reflections on Miss Smith, for I don't allow dat from no man. She am all right."

"I beg pardon," said Midwood humbly; "but I

understood you to say that this contemptible Hulfish had been striving for the affections of Miss Smith."

"So he has; but it ain't her fault. He hab shouldertized her."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Worked on her feelings — scared her — brought her under his inflooence, so dat she ain't 'sponsible for what she does. You understand, don't you?"

"You mean he has hypnotized her?"

"Yas, I b'lebe dat's it; I gits de obpression mixed once in while; dat's what the willain hab done in de case ob Miss Smith."

CHAPTER VIII.

BLOOD ON THE MOON.

At the risk of mortally offending his caller, Jack Midwood threw back his head and laughed till his sides ached.

"This beats Blivens and the bear," was his thought; and then seeing the visitor glaring at him, and apparently on the point of appealing to his razor, he said, —

"Don't feel hurt at my laughter; but I can't help thinking how you will hypnotize Mr. P. Cato Hulfish when you run across him."

"Dat's so!"

And the prospect struck the visitor so comically that he shook all over, his broad shoulders bobbing up and down, and his mouth opening enormously, and displaying a set of teeth which any man or woman might have envied.

"Gollynation! when I catches dat nigger, I'll jes' sot on him, and mash him so flat dat his own moder won't know him from a buckwheat cake — dat's me, George Washington Jenkins, from Varick."

"Mr. Jenkins, I am glad to know you," said Mid-

wood heartily, again extending his hand; "you have my sympathies, and I would like to be of help to you. Is there any way I can serve you?"

The dusky countenance became instantly grave.

"I wants you to sarve as my second in de dool when him and me meets."

"Consider me your best man. What will be the weapons?"

"Razors."

"At a dozen paces?"

"Yas — what you talking 'bout?" demanded Mr. Jenkins, as the absurdity of the proposal struck him.

"You know that according to the code, that base villain, being the challenged party, will have the choice of weapons; and I wonder, now, whether he wouldn't be mean enough to make some condition like that I named, so as to save his hide."

"'Twon't do him any good if he does!" exclaimed the wrathful Jenkins; "for I'm bound to have his carcass. I'll neber forgib de injoory what he hab done me. Put us in front ob each oder, even if we am forty rods apart, and I'll go for him like a runaway locomotive. I tell you, I mean bus'ness, I does!"

"But, see here, let me hear a few of the particulars. I presume you and he and Miss Smith live in Varick, which is fifteen miles up the road toward Wareton."

"Yas," assented the negro, nodding his head several times.

"You and Miss Smith are engaged, I suppose?"

"Yas; dat is, I'm engaged to her, but she says she ain't engaged to me yet. Yo' understands how dat am?"

"Of course; she is a little coy."

"A little cow, did you say?"

"Oh, no; coy, bashful, modest, and doesn't want to admit her betrothal just yet. It's very creditable to her that she feels that way. But what was the cause of this sudden move on your part?"

"Dar war a cake-walk at Miss Johnson's last night. Me and Miss Smith took de prize last yeah, and dat willain Hulfish war so mad dat he sarculated slanderacious reports about me. I engaged Miss Smith to accompany me to de occasion last ebening; but when I called at her residence she warn't dar. Tinking dat dar had been some misunderstanding, I walked down to Miss Johnson's, but didn't find her dar. Bime-by some one told me dat he had seen her and dat willain take dee kyars for Ashmont. Well, den I got hot in de collar!

"I warn't gwine to stand no such conflucions as dat. So I jes' run home, slipped a razor in my hip pocket, and cantered for de station. When I got dar, I disrecollected dat dar warn't no oder down train dat would stop dar afore dis morning. I couldn't wait, I was so b'iling; so I galloped down de railroad dis way. I

stubbed my toes so often dat after a while I steered off into de woods, whar I knowed dar war a path, and kept it up till I arrove hyah."

"You have had quite a tramp, indeed. Do you intend to wait and take the train to Ashmont?"

"No," replied Jenkins thoughtfully; "dat war my fust intentions, but I hab too much disrespect for Miss Smith."

"How is that?"

"I don't want her to see de gore dat will be shed when we meet, so I'm gwine to send my challenge to dat willain Hulfish from dis p'int, inwiting him to come up here on de fust train and hab it out wid me. How much will it cost to send dat telumgram?"

"Nothing for you. Didn't I tell you that I was ready to help you all I can?"

"Dat's wery kind, and I'm much obleeged."

"Don't mention it."

"Don't hab no fear; I neber go back on a friend, and won't tell nobody nuffin' 'bout it."

"No doubt that wretch and the charming Miss Smith are enjoying themselves in each other's society, and we can't break it up any too soon. Let's get right down to business."

Midwood walked briskly within the inclosure, and placed himself before the operating-table. There were no messages passing through the office, so that he

opened the key, and kept it sounding by working his fingers as if it were hot with the dispatches rushing back and forth. His grinning visitor stalked forward, and leaned on the railing, his immense figure towering far above that of the dapper operator, who assumed a grave expression, befitting the solemnity of the occasion.

"The first thing to do is to find out where the scoundrel is," remarked Midwood, ticking the key. "Have you any idea where the two are likely to be found?"

"Miss Smith has a sister dat am a chambermaid at de hotel ob Captain Jones. I shouldn't wonder if de wretches am dere, trying to hide from my wrath."

"That's the place to look for them," and the agent renewed the clicking of the key.

"It will take a few minutes to find out," he remarked, turning abont. "By the way, when you were tramping through the woods last night, did you meet any men or wild animals? I understand there are bears in these parts."

"Dar am a few, but I didn't see none, and I would hab been skeered if I hadn't had my razor wid me."

"By what?"

"Dere's a little cabin 'bout a mile up de road, I reckon, dat de folks used to say war ha'nted. I

done forgot all 'bout it till I almost banged my nose agin it. Den I stopped mighty sudden, fer dere war a light inside."

"Did you look farther?" asked Midwood, becoming interested.

"I war nigh enough to git a peep inside, but I didn't stay long."

"What did you see?"

"Nuffin' much; only three men settin' 'round a little table, drinking something out of a black bottle, talking and smoking."

"Did you hear anything said?"

"Gollynation! I didn't dare stay to listen, for dey war orful bad-looking chaps; dat am, de one dat I seed war."

"What sort of man was he?"

"Wal, what I seed showed a slim man wid a black muftache and black hair; and when he grinned his white teef shone like a cat's frough his muftache."

"Ah, ha!" thought Midwood, "that's my man, Mr. Mugg Voorhes. This information is interesting."

He questioned George Washington Jenkins closely, but found he knew nothing more than he had already told.

"Ain't it 'bout time we heered from dat willain?" asked the caller when fully fifteen minutes had passed.

"Yes; I will send again — ah! here it is now."

"Let me know mighty quick what he says, for I can't hold in much longer."

"He is there!" exclaimed Midwood.

"Am dat so?" added Jenkins with glowing face. "Gollynation! let's give it to him red hot."

"That's the talk. What shall it be?"

"In de fust place, tell him he am a low-down willain, an' dat I'm gwine to wipe up de hull county wid him."

"All right," and Midwood clicked the instrument.

"He seems to have come down to the office so as to communicate the more readily with you."

Sitting at the table, with his side toward the key, and his hand deftly working it, Midwood sent and received messages with a rapidity which ought to have excited the suspicion of his caller, though it did not.

"He returns your sentiments, and considers you a base cur and coward. He aches to get at you."

"Does he say dat?" shouted the wrathful Jenkins. "I wish I had him here dis minute."

And he stretched his beam-like arms above his head, and gnashed his fine-looking teeth together.

"He wants to know what you want."

"He does, eh? Tell him I only want a chance to get at him."

"He says that all he wants is a chance to get

at you. You never amounted to anything, and Miss Smith wouldn't speak to you if she met you in Africa."

"Oh, de willain!" muttered Jenkins, whirling about, and striding several times across the floor; "and he dares say dat to me, to me! Tell him I challenge him to meet me in a dool."

Midwood's fingers were going like mad. It may be said that the wire communicating with Ashmont seemed to be palpitating with the momentous news.

"He accepts your challenge," was the remark of Midwood, with a solemn shake of the head.

"All right, dat suits me; dat's bus'ness. Ax him what his wippons am to be."

"He says anything will suit him, — cannon, muskets, pistols, swords, razors, rifles, or brickbats."

"Gollynation! It seems to me he am mighty flunctious!" commented Mr. Jenkins; "but dat hits me atween de eyes. Ax him how soon he can get down to Grubb City. Dis am nootral ground, and we don't want to shock Miss Priscilla by de shedding ob gore."

A suspiciously few minutes later Midwood called out, —

"He has just bought a ticket for the next up train."

No pen could do justice to the expression of the African's face on receiving this information. His eyes

seemed to expand and to protrude farther than ever. Midwood, whose enjoyment was keen added, —

"I guess there will be no trouble about arranging that duel, Mr. Jenkins; he may be here in the course of the next hour, prepared to fight you in whichever way is the most agreeable."

Jenkins heaved a great sigh, and walking to the other side of the room, sat down on the bench and mopped his forehead.

"Tell him," he added, after a minute's silence, "dat if he'll apollergize I'll let up on him dis once."

The key seemed to be busy with the transmission of the message and the reply.

"Mr. Hulfish seems to be on the war-path. He says he won't apologize, but wants to fight. He is glad of the chance, and you have only to await the arrival of the up train and he will give you all you want."

"What's de use of his being so obstreporous?" demanded Mr. Jenkins, as if Midwood was blamable for it all.

"There seems to be no restraining him. I tell you, Mr. Jenkins, in an affray of this kind, it is always customary to make full preparations for whatever may happen. If you have any messages for your friends, I will take charge of them."

"What's dat fur?"

"In case of accident. You know Mr. Hulfish

might happen to send a bullet through you the first fire — there's no saying what luck he may have. In case that should happen you would want to have your dying wishes conveyed to your friends — your father and mother, if they are living."

The face of the African seemed to assume an ashen hue, and his big white teeth fairly rattled.

"Mr. Hulfish don't want to appolergize, does he?"

"He doesn't think of such a thing."

"Ahem! How soon does he start?"

"The operator replies that he started a half-hour ago, and will be due here in fifteen minutes."

Mr. Jenkins fairly leaped from the floor.

"He seems to be in a mighty hurry," he remarked in a faltering voice; "all right, I'm ready."

He sauntered out on the platform, as if in quest of fresh air. Midwood watched him pacing thoughtfully up and down for some minutes, pausing now and then, as if to listen for the sounds of the approaching train. Suddenly he bolted off and disappeared in the woods.

"Ah, if he only knew," muttered Midwood with a laugh, as he watched his going, "that I haven't sent a word to Mr. Hulfish nor received one from him!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE CIPHER TELEGRAMS.

JACK MIDWOOD had had his amusement at the expense of his dusky visitor, whose courage oozed so rapidly when he believed that his hated rival was eager to meet him, and he now became more thoughtful; for underneath the stratum of merriment he had secured what promised to be valuable information.

George Washington Jenkins, on his long tramp from Varick to this point, had seen three men in a cabin in the woods, not more than a mile away. These individuals, Midwood believed, were plotting the robbery of the train, which would leave Wareton with a treasure on board worth a big risk to obtain. If Superintendent Starkweather had only told the young man the particulars, or even named the train bearing the treasure, it would be easy to formulate a plan by which to checkmate the criminals.

The superintendent had chosen not to do so, however, and it remained for Midwood to decide what he would do. He was half inclined more than once to telegraph to Mr. Starkweather, mak-

ing known what he had learned, and suggesting that extra precautions be taken. But that would be a humbling of his pride too great to be borne.

"I will do what I can," was his conclusion; "but I sha'n't ask any favors of him."

The next train would leave Wareton at nine in the morning. Indeed, it had already left, as he learned by telegraph, and was well on its way toward Barmore. If the treasure was on that, it was too late for Midwood to take any precautions against the parties planning its holding up.

The next train, the Thunderbolt express as it was called, left Wareton at three in the afternoon, and was due at Grubb City less than an hour and a half later. There was another three hours later; but it was not so important, making many more stops. Midwood decided in his own mind that if any large amount of money was shipped for Barmore, or some point beyond, it would be on the three-o'clock train.

The schedule was such that the agent had leisure to do pretty much as he pleased. It had been his intention to spend the afternoon in a ramble in the woods, in quest of some of the game which was occasionally encountered. He decided to do so, with the hope of encountering an altogether different species of game.

He had just finished his noonday lunch, when, to

his surprise, Mugg Voorhes suddenly appeared on the platform, entered the office, and abruptly asked, —

"Am I too late to send that message, young man?"

"Just in time," replied Midwood, who was seated behind the railing. "Write it out, and it shall be forwarded without delay."

The sinister-looking fellow stepped to the high desk, where the yellow blanks were provided, and busied himself for several minutes in writing. He seemed to have considerable trouble in suiting himself, and crossed out again and again, tearing up several, and thrusting them in his pocket.

Finally he got one to suit him, and handing it to the operator, inquired, —

"What is the rate on that?"

Midwood carefully counted the words, and replied, —

"Thirty cents."

"Can you send it at once?"

"Certainly; there will be no delay at this end."

The message ran thus: —

"Telegraph at once what time Mr. Woolwich will sail for Europe. H. H. Hudson."

It was addressed to William Ringgold, Wareton Hotel.

"Do you wish to wait for an answer?"

"I might as well," replied the visitor, walking slowly to the middle of the room, and taking one of the chairs.

"Will you have a cigar?" asked Midwood, feeling as if some reparation was due for his action of the night before."

"No; I don't want any of your cigars," was the curt reply.

"All right; it makes no difference to me," remarked the young man, flushing up as he shoved the weed back in his pocket.

The visitor sat glum and silent for some time. The operator watched him out of the corner of his eye, with just the faintest suspicion that he might resent his cavalier treatment. Midwood was determined not to be caught off his guard, and was sure that the man could not draw quicker than he. But if the fellow had held any such intention he changed his mind and made no demonstration.

The minutes passed slowly, and there seemed to be an unnecessary delay in the response. The operator did not attempt to renew the conversation after the snub he had received, and Mr. Voorhes sat like a stone. No doubt he would have been glad to even up matters; but the experience of this individual in the devious paths of crime taught him that one must restrain his impulses at times, and that it never pays

to perpetrate a criminal act for the simple purpose of revenge. Some loftier motive, like that of gain, must be the governing impulse.

At last there was a call from the Wareton office, and the expected answer arrived. It was thus: —

"Mr. Woolwich expects to sail at three o'clock, on the steamer which leaves on the 21st. W. R."

The visitor rose to his feet to scan this message, and stood several minutes in silence. Then he quietly asked, —

"Is it prepaid?"

"Yes, sir."

Without another word he turned about, passed out the door, and strode off up the almost untraveled highway, which wound through the woods to the south.

Again Jack Midwood was left to himself, and his active brain was never more busy than for the next half hour.

Several points were imbedded in his mind. The first was that three desperate men had planned the robbery of one of the trains on the W. G. C. & N. Road, because they had learned in some way that a large amount of money or treasure was to be shipped over it. The cunning miscreants possessed unsuspected ways of learning such things, their astonishing suc-

cess often being chiefly due to their superior knowledge in that respect.

Now, nothing is more evident in these days than that no railway train can be "held up" when the authorities have timely notice of such an attempt, for they can take precautions which must defeat such a purpose; but it is the surprise, the unexpected appearance of the criminals, which gives them frequent success.

Midwood was on the point of telegraphing his suspicions, or rather convictions, to the superintendent, so that an extra guard might be placed in the express-car; but the memory of the curt reply he had received prevented, though it did not hinder him from putting on foot several measures he had in mind.

Of course he could not be certain of the real meaning of the messages he had sent and received for Mugg Voorhes, but he translated them in accordance with a simple rule. The man's inquiry as to Mr. Woolwich referred to the gold or money. The reply that the individual named would leave at three o'clock on the twenty-first for Europe, required the substitution of Barmore for Europe, and then the whole meaning became plain, since the date, the twenty-first, was that very day.

This interpretation being borne in mind, it will be seen that Voorhes's question as to the time of the

shipment was answered by the information that it would leave Wareton that afternoon at three o'clock.

All this was as "plain as a pikestaff," but the uncertainty remained as to the reliability of Midwood's suppositions. Nothing is easier in this world that to form a theory; and seemingly, after it is once formulated, all the subsequent facts bear it out, but the discovery of the truth often shatters the whole structure.

If Midwood had slipped in one instance, then the whole thing was a rope of sand and went to nothingness.

He had faith enough in it, however, to shape his actions accordingly.

It struck him that the first step to take was to pick up some additional knowledge about that cabin in the woods, where Mr. Jenkins had seen the three plotters together. Possibly he might gather more information than he, though the risk and difficulty were great.

"At any rate, I'll try it," he concluded, rising to his feet and passing out-doors, "since nothing can be gained by sitting here all day."

He carefully secured the place. He had no time to remove the skin of the bear, and changed his mind. He managed to roll the carcass upon the truck, and with much exertion and patience wheeled it to a

safe point, where he dumped it upon the earth and left it to such wandering dogs or wild animals as might be attracted by the scent.

Then, with every chamber in his revolver loaded, he entered the wood on the other side of the road, and began his search for the path. The locality being unfamiliar to him, it required some time before he found it; but he struck it at last, and with a strong feeling of hope pressed forward in his work of solving the mystery that had puzzled him so long.

CHAPTER X.

P. CATO HULFISH.

THE region, it will be remembered, was a strange one to Jack Midwood; for though he had often ridden through it on the cars, he now entered the long stretch of forest for the first time. The trees were mostly pine, and were so open and free from undergrowth that even without the aid of the tolerably well-marked path he would have found no difficulty in traveling.

He had been at Grubb City, an entire day and not a solitary person had called to buy a ticket. The only passenger who seemed to have gotten off there was Mugg Voorhes, and the young man began to doubt whether he had left the train at that point after all.

"Why in the name of common-sense does the company maintain a station here?" he asked himself, as he cautiously advanced along the footpath; "I don't see why the folks don't wait for the country to develop instead of striving to force its growth. But it is no funeral of mine, and I am not losing anything."

He reflected that if he did not get back to the

station before one of the trains was due, it would make no difference to any passenger who might wish to board it, since he could do so without as well as with a ticket.

"I would like to sell it to him, however," he thought, "so as to encourage the company to declare a dividend."

He had journeyed nearly a half-mile, when, to his astonishment, he became aware that some person or animal was following him. This was so unexpected that he was puzzled, and stopping in the trail, looked behind him for an explanation.

On his way he had come to a stream which crossed the path, and was so wide that only by a running start and the putting forth of his utmost strength was he able to clear it. He had just passed the turn beyond, when a splash told him that man or beast had attempted the same exploit and failed.

"I can't say I fancy this sort of thing," he thought, stepping out of the path and placing himself behind the trunk of the largest pine within reach.

He was not kept long in waiting, when a small, weazen-faced negro, with stooping shoulders, came along the trail. He was attired as stunningly as Mr. Jenkins, but of so insignificant and unique appearance that the young man smiled. He suspected his identity at the first glance.

Waiting until he was nearly opposite, Midwood called out in a guarded undertone, —

"Helloa, Mr. Hulfish! How are you?"

The dwarfish man started, and looked affrightedly in the direction whence the hail came.

"Bress me!" he exclaimed, "what a scare you guv me!"

The young man approached, and stood beside him in the path, carefully studying the pinched countenance, which, if possible, was more comical than that of his rival.

"Where are you going?" demanded Midwood.

"Home to die; hab you no 'bjections?"

"Why are you going to die?"

"I'm sick; I wanter die; I don't wanter lib."

"What's the trouble?"

Mr. Hulfish straightened up his stooping shoulders, so as to give him a better chance to sigh, and fairly groaned, —

"'Cause I hain't got nuffin' to lib fur."

"How about Miss Priscilla Smith?"

"Who done tole yo' bout dat?" asked the amazed negro.

"Never mind; I know all about it. I heard about your running off with her from the cake-walk last night."

"Bress my soul! Who tole yo', boss?"

"I'll let you know after a while. Where is Miss Smith?"

"I dunno, and don't care," was the dejected response, with another prodigious sigh.

"Have you quarreled?"

"I sh'd tink we hab; quarreled like a house afire. Me and her hab dissolved parnumship, and I'll neber spoke to her agin if I lib ten tousand yeahs."

"What's the trouble? Has she played you false?"

Mr. Hulfish removed his hat, which happened to be a fine-looking derby, that showed several recent dents, and scratched his pate, which was as bald on the top as a billiard-ball, and said, —

"Wal, yo' see, I started to scorch Miss Smith down to Ashmont last ebenin' to see yer sister dat works out. Eberyting war lubly, and we war eatin' candy, when jes' as we got beyond yo' station, — dat is whar I s'pose you libs, Grubb City, — I found dat my pocketbook war missin'. I b'lebed Miss Smith had stole it, and tole her so. What does she do but git up and git mad, and fetch me a swat ober de mouf dat loosened my front teeth. No man ain't a-gwine to stand any sich nonsense, and I squared off and let drive at Miss Smith; den" —

The chivalrous Mr. Hulfish paused as if the subject was becoming too painful to be pursued farther; but it was just like Midwood to press him.

"Well, what happened then?"

"I say, boss, does yo' know Miss Smith?"

"No."

"She weighs ober two hundred pounds, and I didn't, durfur, hab any kind ob show. She slammed me about dat kyar wid de white folks a-settin' her on. What do yo' tink? One ob dem white trash opened de door, and she acteraly flung me off de platform alongside de track; what do yo' tink ob dat?"

"Served you right for striking a woman."

"Fortinitly de kyars warn't gwine berry fast, and I only rolled ober five or six times, when I fotched up agin a tree. I tink," added the disconsolate Mr. Hulfish, rubbing his hand over his bare poll, "dat I split de trunk ob dat tree clean frough."

"Do you know," said Midwood severely, "that George Washington Jenkins is looking for you?"

"'Fore de Lawd! What's dat yo' say?"

"He's looking for you, and says he will have your life for running off with Miss Smith, which he claims as his own."

"Did he say dat? Now, dar's no need ob makin' any fuss. I don' want anyting more to do wid her; he kin hab her."

"But he wants you."

"Whar am he?" asked Mr. Hufilsh, glancing

around, as if he expected to see his dreaded rival leap from behind one of the trees.

"He was in the station to-day, and sent you a message, demanding that you meet him at Grubb City, and fight a duel to the death."

"Den he must be somewhar 'bout yar."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Den de best ting I kin do am to trabel;" and the alarmed negro started at a rapid walk in the direction of his home, but the young man checked him.

"Hold on, not so fast, Mr. Hulfish; are you willing to meet him with pistols or knives, or cannon or razors?"

"What do I want ter do dat fur?"

"So as to settle the mortal insult you have put upon him by taking his young lady away from him."

"Why, dat's all settled."

"How?"

"Miss Smith settled it when she frowed me head fust off de platform ob de kyar; dat orter satsumfy anybody but a born robber and biggermist. Do you expect to see Mr. Jenkins bery soon?"

"I may."

"Will you do me de onspeakable favor ob explaining tings to him? You can tell him dat I doan

bear him any hard feeling, and if we meet after dis, I'm willing he shall lib."

"I fear I will have hard work. No doubt Mr. Jenkins would be willing to shake hands after everything had been explained to him; but he is quick-tempered, and will be apt to sit down on you before you get the chance to tell the whole story."

"If dat am so I guess I'd better took to de woods;" and the thoroughly frightened fellow was about to carry out his own suggestion when Midwood concluded the joke had gone far enough."

"I will tell you a secret, Mr. Hulfish, now that you have had such an unpleasant experience with Miss Smith, who must be a very fickle female."

"What am dat?"

"George Washington Jenkins was looking for you, and he was very angry; but when I made him think you were also looking for him, he was scared. He is afraid of you. All you've got to do when he shows up and begins to bluster is to talk fight, and he will come down mighty sudden."

"Yo' am suah ob dat?" asked the African, grasping at the idea; "yo' don't tink dat he will be kinder slow 'bout coming down, for yo' knows he am a bigger man dan me, and can run faster."

"That's the reason I am giving you these pointers. He will try to scare you; but if you brace up and talk back he won't hold out."

"Good! den after it am all ober, him and me will form an obliance obfensive and profensive agin Miss Smith. We'll turn up our noses at her whenever she show herself whar we am."

"She may turn on you and trounce you both."

"I don't tink she can do dat," said Mr. Hulfish doubtfully; "dat is, if Mr. Jenkins and me sticks together and helps each other."

"But she may take you separately."

"Den we've got to look out; de fur will fly, but when we ain't together so as to back up agin each other, why I'll adwise dat we treats her respectful."

"Well, your plan seems to be the only one that can be followed, and evidently you have a level head. Are you heeled?"

Mr. Hulfish, instead of wearing patent leathers like his rival, had on a pair of immense boots, coming up to his knees, into which his trousers-legs were thrust. Reaching down his right hand, he drew forth an immense razor.

"How will dat do, boss?"

"That's enough to scare George Washington Jenkins out of his wits. But remember you have only to display it if he attempts to bluff you. Don't begin to carve under any circumstances."

"All right, boss; and now I'll proceed to segaciate humwards."

"Don't forget either," called Midwood after him warningly, "that Mr. Jenkins is also traveling in the same direction. Possibly you may overtake him in the woods before you get home, for it is a long tramp ahead of you. Keep cool, and bear in mind what I have told you."

The frightened African promised to heed the counsel of his friend, who remained where he was until the fellow had disappeared around a bend in the forest path.

CHAPTER XI.

A COUPLE OF CALLS.

Superintendent Starkweather of the W. G. C. & N. Railway stepped briskly into his office that morning, and had just removed his light overcoat and hung it in the closet, and placed his hat on the stand beside it, when he was followed by a gentleman of about his own age, who had the appearance of an easy-going merchant, inclined to corpulency, but very well contented with the world and himself. He was Mr. Thornton, president of the Wareton First National Bank, with which the railroad kept a good account. He and the superintendent were old friends; and he had only to present himself at the door of the private office to be cordially invited within, an invitation which was accepted as promptly as it was given.

"You remember, Carman," said the visitor addressing his friend by his given name, "that I spoke to you a couple of days ago about the shipment of a large amount of coin to New York."

The superintendent inclined his head to signify that he remembered the circumstance.

"Well, we want to send it to-day on the three-o'clock express."

"Very well; have it here in time, and I think the W. G. C. & N. can be depended upon to do its part."

"Exactly; but do you know that I feel a little nervous over the business?"

Mr. Starkweather smiled, and leaned back in his chair.

"I don't know why you should; it isn't the first time you have sent a valuable amount of specie, and I suspect you have received several consignments that would make a comfortable addition to any one's bank-account. How much is the amount?"

"Fifty thousand dollars; and it is all in gold, for the Chemical Bank of New York."

"Yes."

"I suppose I ought not to feel timid over it, but it is too much to lose."

"If you send it by the express company, paying the extra cost for guaranty, you will be safe no matter what happens."

"How about the express company and your road?"

"You have nothing to do with that; let them walk the floor instead of you. But tell me what is it that causes any misgiving on your part?"

"Why, it seems to me that there are more train robberies going on just now than ever before in the

history of railroading. In the days of the James boys it happened only occasionally; but now there is hardly a paper which does not contain some account of the holding up of a train, as they term it."

"But you have heard of none except in the West or Southwest," suggested the unruffled superintendent.

"True; but that is no guaranty we shall not. Crimes, like diseases, are epidemic; and I have a conviction that that sort of thing will become common on this side of the Mississippi before it is stamped out and made well nigh impossible."

Superintendent Starkweather's smile assumed a sympathizing expression as he looked into the grave face of his visitor.

"It may be, but I don't think the first case will be with the W. G. C. & N."

"That's the trouble; no one expects lightning to strike where it does strike. If one did, he would take care to be somewhere else when the bolt descended. Have you reflected on the tempting opportunities presented by your line for just such a proceeding?"

"I must admit that I haven't given it much thought."

"Reflect, then, for a moment. The distance from here to Barmore is ninety miles; and nearly the entire route is through a wild, sparsely settled country, cov-

ered with dense woods, and backed by a rugged, mountainous district, so inaccessible and thinly populated that I am satisfied there are hundreds of square miles where no foot except that of the Indian has ever trod."

"What of that?"

"What of that?" repeated the bank president reprovingly. "Does not that statement answer the question? Some years ago, when I was traveling over the Iron Mountain Railway through Missouri and Arkansas, the conductor pointed out to me the several localities where the train robberies had taken place. I noticed particularly the features I have described, and reflected how difficult it must have been for the officers of justice to run the criminals down; but I'm blessed if the country is any worse than between here and Barmore."

"You forget that we are surrounded by a densely populated State on every hand, even though this section failed to respond to the boom we counted on some years ago. No, Mr. Thornton, I can't share your misgivings with you. Bring down your big strong box; we will put it in the express-car in charge of two brave men, both veterans of the late war, fully armed, and then you can go to sleep without a further thought."

The bank official thrummed the desk for a moment with his gloved hand and gave a faint sigh.

"Possibly I am a little shaken. At any rate, I will take your advice. Of course we must keep the matter as much of a secret as possible."

"We always do that."

"And of course you will tell no one."

"Certainly not."

The visitor rose to go. Standing with his hat in hand he added, —

"It may be that I will change my mind and use some other train or wait until to-morrow."

"If you do, be kind enough to send me word."

"Of course;" and the gentleman bowed himself out and walked briskly back to the institution over which he had presided for a number of years, quite cheerful and buoyant, but with just enough misgiving to feel slightly uncomfortable.

Mr. Thornton was known to every resident of the bustling town of Wareton; and from the moment he appeared on the street to that of his arrival at the bank, he was continually returning the salutations of his friends and acquaintances. He did not busy himself to look around, for they were everywhere.

Had he glanced across the street, however, and been of a little more suspicious nature, he would have observed an individual whom he had never seen before, and to whom he himself was evidently a gentleman of considerable interest. This man was short, stock-

ily built, well-dressed, with a bright, wide-awake look. He was smoking a good cigar, and was coming in the direction of the railway station, on the other side of the street, acting as if he was looking for some one, — which was the fact, — when he caught sight of the corpulent bank president, swinging his cane, and approaching at a pace which showed that he was trying to make up for lost time.

The stranger instantly wheeled, and sauntered along at a gait which soon allowed Mr. Thornton to pass him. Then the short man increased his own speed, so that he easily kept the other in sight until he ascended the few steps in front of the bank, and disappeared through the heavy doors. Then the stranger in Wareton walked leisurely to the leading hotel, seated himself near the window, and called for a glass of brandy.

The individual was in this stuffy room, smoking, drinking, and thinking, when a boy belonging to the hotel brought him a dispatch. It was the one already given, which was sent from Grubb City, inquiring of Mr. William Ringgold when a certain Mr. Woolwich would sail for Europe. After signing for it, and reading it over several times, the man rose to his feet and passed out to the street, whence he made his way to the bank.

To his inquiry for Mr. Thornton, that gentleman

came forward from his office, and looked keenly in the not displeasing face of the stranger, who said, —

"Mr. Starkweather asked me to call and inquire whether you had any word to send him."

"Do you come from Mr. Starkweather's office?"

"Yes, sir; I am his cousin, Mr. Whitfield, from Philadelphia. I am spending a few days with him, and he asked me to drop in with the inquiry. He thought you would feel safer to place anything in the hands of a gentleman than a boy."

"Thanks; that is thoughtful on the part of Carman. Wait one moment, and I will give you a line to hand him."

The bank president was absent but a minute or two, when he bustled out again with a sealed letter. He glanced at the flap, and tested it to make sure that it could not be readily opened, and then handed it to Mr. Whitfield, who bowed to the smiling president, donned his hat, and passed out.

This stockily built stranger in Wareton walked back to the hotel at the same leisurely pace, returned to the reading-room, where, taking only the most simple precautions against any one observing him, he deliberately opened the letter and read: —

"I have decided to send the money on the three-o'clock train, as I thought of doing. Your recommendation of the strong guard, and the fact that there is no call for delay, has decided

me. The box will be there in time. Your cousin, Mr. Whitfield, seems to be a very pleasant gentleman, and I am glad to see him in Wareton.

As ever, THORNTON."

A grim smile lit up the features of "Mr. Whitfield" at this proof of the good impression he had made. Twisting the bit of paper into a thin roll, he applied a match, and watched it consumed to ashes. Then he passed into the office and forwarded a dispatch to Grubb City, which the reader will recall as an announcement that Mr. Woolwich would sail for Europe on the twenty-first of the month, which was that day.

Mr. Thornton, president of the Wareton National Bank, was one of the shrewdest financiers in the State. The institution probably lost less money through bad paper than any similar corporation. The president knew at a glance the signature of every customer of the bank, and the financial standing, as well as the integrity, of every one applying for accommodation. It was his boast that he could read a man's character by one searching look into his countenance. Most likely he had done so time and again; but, bless his honest heart, what a mistake he occasionally made! as, for instance, in the case of Mr. Whitfield of Philadelphia.

CHAPTER XII.

PEACE OR WAR?

It so came about that the very contingency feared by Jack Midwood took place.

When P. Cato Hulfish bade him good-day, and resumed his tramp in the direction of Varick, his home, he was only a short distance behind George Washington Jenkins, who was plodding in the same direction; and each was meditating how he would conduct himself when brought face to face with the other — a meeting which must inevitably take place sooner or later, since both dwelt in the same small town, and had long been rivals in the regard of Miss Priscilla Smith.

Jenkins had good cause for weariness; for it will be remembered that he had done a good deal of walking, while his rival was in the same physical state. Nothing was more natural, therefore, than that the former should throw himself down beside the trunk of a large tree to rest his tired limbs and body.

As he sat he faced Varick, the tree hiding most of his person from the view of any one coming from the opposite point of the compass. He was just sinking into a doze when he was startled by the sound

of a footstep close to him. He hastily put on his shiny silk hat, which had been lying on the ground beside him, and peered around the corner of the tree.

There was P. Cato Hulfish, not ten feet distant, and the last man in the world he wished to see.

The pedestrian stopped short at sight of the bulky figure of his enemy, and the two stared for a moment at each other in silence. Then the hand of Hulfish stole down the side of his leg toward the handle of his typical weapon.

"None of dat!" called Jenkins, whose big hand began fumbling at his hip; "what yo' trying to do?"

"What yo' trying to do yo'self?"

"Nuffin."

"Den I ain't trying to do nuffin'; take yo' hand away from yo' hip pocket."

"Let dat boot-leg alone yo'self. Am it wah or peace?"

"Jes' as yo' says," replied Hulfish, with a vivid recollection of the instructions given him by Midwood.

Jenkins fancied he saw signs of weakening in his opponent,

"I'd jes' like to eat yo' up; I's a good mind to doot too."

"Why don't yo' begin? Yo' can't start in too soon to suit me."

And once more he slightly stooped.

"But I's regard for yo' fam'ly; I don't want to bury yo' hyar in de woods."

"Pshaw! I hain't got no fam'ly; if yo' wants to do any burying yo's got to got de corpse fust; sail in and got him! Oo-oh!"

Hulfish's heart was beating fast. Had his opponent taken one step toward him, he would have turned and run for life, bawling "murder" at the top of his voice; but he roused his waning courage to a desperate point, and made the grandest bluff of his life by gnashing his teeth, bending his head, and stepping toward the huge Jenkins. The latter involuntarily recoiled, and thereby the other knew that he had prevailed over him.

"What's de use ob getting so slambangerous 'bout nuffin?" he asked deprecatingly; "I don't bear yo' no hard feelings. Yo and me, Mr. Hulfish, mought as well be friends."

"Now yo's talking sense," replied Hulfish, straightening up, with a feeling of relief too vast and all-pervading to be described.

"Den it am peace, am it, Mr. Hulfish?"

"If yo' says so, I's agreeable."

"Den let's shook hands."

The dusky palms were crossed and the compact was sealed.

The giant-like Jenkins wondered that the other should prove so docile and magnanimous after send-

ing him such terrific messages from Ashmont, but he was mighty glad it was so.

Now that the dark cloud of war had been swept aside, Jenkins became his airy self again. His mouth expanded, and he broke into hearty but not loud laughter.

"So yo' war looking for me, Cato, and wanted to fight a dool, did yo'?"

This question was not qnite clear to the smaller man, but he thought it best to continue the character he had assumed.

"I may as well own up, Wash, dat dat am de case."

"I tell yo' I war hot in de collar when I sot out to look for yo', but it's all right now. How did yo' leave de obstinguished Miss Priscilla Smith?"

"Huf! doan say nuffin' to me 'bout her."

Jenkins's eyes bulged and his jaw dropped.

"Why, Cato, what's up?"

"She and me hab parted foreber."

"How's dat? I doan understand."

"She got wrathy 'cause I accoosed her ob stealing my pocketbook. Ef I hadn't found it afterwards where it had slid down into my boot-leg, I would hab been sartin she stole it. What do yo' tink, Wash, ob a young lady dat gits her back up for such a little ting as being accoosed ob stealing?"

Jenkins glowed with happiness to hear that a mor-

tal quarrel had taken place between his rival and the dusky beauty, but he was politic enough to conceal his real feelings under the guise of sympathy.

"Yo' doan tell me she got riled at dat?"

"She did."

"Well, Cato, she am no lady — dat's my 'pinion."

"Shake!"

Hulfish extended his hand, which was impulsively grasped by Jenkins, and sealing-wax itself could not have closed the compact more tightly. But Jenkins was still curious.

"But how do yo' disolbe de oblationship atween yo'?"

Cato was not quite prepared to give his late rival a clear account of their flurry: that was too humiliating.

"She and me war standing on de platform ob de kyar 'scussing de subjac', whin my foot slipped and I rolled off. She mought have grabbed as I was gwine, but she war too kodictious."

"Jes' what yo' might hab expected. Cato, we'll bofe drop her like a hot b'iled egg."

"Dem's my sent'ments; we'll treat her wid de scorn dat all such comprehensible conduct desarbes."

"When we meet her on de street we'll turn up our noses and won't purtend we doan see her when she smiles and bows. If we hab a wote at de cake-walks we'll allers wote agin her gotting a prize."

"Dat's de agreement."

And yet those two dusky comrades were as treacherous as if they had been white men. Each resolved in his own heart that, if he could win the smiles of the fickle beauty, he would do so regardless of the feelings of his rival and their mutual pledges. Such is frail human nature the world over.

As is the rule in cases of such sudden friendship, the two became very effusive, each anxious to prove how much he thought of the other.

"Washy," said Hulfish, "it am a mighty long tramp home; if yo' haben't 'nough funds 'bout yo'self, I'm well fixed; for yo' knows dat I' done found my pocket-book dat I thort Miss Prisciller Smith had tooken from me."

"I had 'bout fifteen hundred dollars in my pocket when I luff home, but I reckons I must hab dropped it out somewhar 'long de road."

"Dat's too bad."

"Doan' make no difference," loftily remarked Jenkins; "I can drawr anoder check when I got home; but yo' see I'll be short till I got dar."

"Dat's why I would like to accomerdate yo'."

"How much spondoolicks hab yo' about yo'r garments?"

Hulfish shoved one hand away under his arm, and then seemed to be feeling around the cavernous depths of some wonderfully deep receptacle. Finally he fished

out a huge wallet, tied around with a piece of twine. This being unknotted, he opened the carpetbag-like depository, and carefully examined the contents.

"Wash!" he suddenly exclaimed, looking up with a startled expression on his face, "what do yo' tinks?"

"I dunno; what shall I tink?"

"Dar's only eleben cents dar!"

"Yo' doan say!"

"But dar was nine hundred and fo'ty-eight dollars and sebenteen cents when I luff home last night. Whar do yo' s'pose the rest hab gwine?"

"Why, doan yo' understand?" asked Jenkins with a contemptuous sniff; "dat Purcill Smith picked yo' pocket; den she slipped back dem eleben cents and tied up yo'r wallet, just to fool yo' when yo' war cotched in some submergency."

"Shake!"

And, as if the two were delighted over the discovery of the perfidy of one of their race, even though she belonged to the gentler sex, those bad men shook hands with more ardor than ever.

"Eleben cents won't let us ride more'n 'bout fifteen feet on de kyars," observed Jenkins; "and as we would hab to tramp back to Grubb City to board de train, it won't pay."

"Yo's right; we'll hab to walk de rest ob de way

to Varick; but it ain't late, and we can take our time. S'pose we doan got dar till after dark, we ain't afeared ob nothin'."

"Ob course not; we's allers well heeled, and I'd be glad to hab a little scrimmage wid somebody."

"Dat's me too. How can we doot?"

"Wonder if dar's any chicken-roosts round hyar?"

"Shouldn't wonder; but dat ain't dangeriferous 'nough to suit me, Washy. I want ter got into a fight wid somebody. I's got de idee," he suddenly added with glowing face; "de biggest idee ob de age."

"What's dat? Let it be something full ob danger."

"Yo' recomembers dat cabin a little way ahead dat stands back from de path 'mong de trees?"

"Y-a-s," gasped Jenkins.

"Let's make it a wisit."

"Yo' means the ole house dat am ha'nted?"

"Ob course, dat's de one."

Jenkins knees shook, for that was the last place in the world he wished to approach after what he had seen there only a short time before. But he would die before showing the white feather in the presence of P. Cato Hulfish.

"Nuffin couldn't suit me no better!" he said with seeming enthusiasm; "I neber did b'lebe in ghostes, did yo'?"

"Sartinly not; nobody doan b'lebe in such foolishness but ole women and oneddercated white folks."

"Come on, den; let's be off; we can't reach dat spot too soon to suit me.

And the two started for the cabin to which reference has been made, little dreaming of the experience that awaited them.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GHOST.

P. CATO HULFISH was angry with himself within two minutes after he had made the proposition to visit the haunted cabin. The idea was one of those impulsive ones which we always regret when acted upon. He expected and hoped that his companion would modify the scheme into something not quite so uncanny in its nature. There were hen-roosts in the neighborhood, though few in number (it isn't necessary to explain how he came to possess such definite information on this point), and he thought that since the matter had been mentioned, Jenkins would adhere to it.

But he had ardently embraced the first proposal; so much so, indeed, that he took the lead in the advance upon the dreaded structure.

As for Jenkins, he was as much opposed to the visit as the other. But he could not show timidity after his display of courage in challenging the other by telegraph to mortal combat. So he assumed a daring the very opposite of his nature.

"De big fool," he muttered to himself: "what does

he want to go pokin' round a lot ob hobblegoblins and ghostes fur? Dey neber hurt him, and I hope dey'll go fur dat bald head ob his'n. I know what I'll do," he added, compressing his lips with an iron resolution.

The tramp continued for a hundred yards or more through the woods, considerable undergrowth appearing, so that despite the ardor of the seemingly brave fellows they were compelled to decrease their pace, inasmuch as it would never do to warn the disembodied spirits of their approach.

A peculiar condition of affairs existed. Jenkins, having recently visited the place, knew the exact course to follow; but Hulfish had not looked upon the cabin for years, and his memory was rather hazy, except as to the awfulness of the legends attached to the structure. He was not certain, therefore, of the right route to take.

Jenkins resolved in the secrecy of his own heart to lose his way, and Hulfish ardently hoped he would do so. Then there would be an excuse for the abandonment of the enterprise.

Jenkins stalked forward with his confident stride, his companion trotting at his heels, until he realized from the appearance of things around him that he was approaching perilously near the cabin. Then he diverged to the left, with the same defiant pace, until he knew he was astray.

Suddenly he came to a stop.

"Gollynation!" he exclaimed, looking inquiringly around, "I b'lebe I'm off de track."

"Dat's what I was imaginating; it's too bad," remarked Hulfish.

"Hab yo' any idee ob de right course, Cate?"

Mr. Hulfish was confident that it lay to their right; accordingly he pointed to the left.

"If I disremember ozactly, it am off dar somewhar."

Heavens! A shiver ran down the spine of Jenkins, who knew that his companion had pointed toward the very spot where the cabin stood!

"S'pose yo' leads de way, as I'm a little obfuscated," suggested Jenkins.

"Ob course," replied Hulfish, happy in the chance to draw his friend from the terrible locality. As for Jenkins, he chuckled in his heart to see the trap into which the exceedingly rash fellow was about to blunder.

"De ole fool," he thought, "it sarves him right. I hope one ob de spooks will grab him by what little wool dar am on his head and yank de life out ob him."

"We'll soon be dar," called Cato over his shoulder, growing more reckless as he believed the distance between them and the haunted cabin increased.

"We can't hab much furder to go — hebens o' nath!"

He stopped as if shot. His knees wabbled so he could hardly keep his feet. There stood the fearful building right in front of him.

"Ain't dat lucky!" called back Jenkins in a cautious undertone, for although terrified himself he was delighted at the fix in which the leader was caught. "Jes' sail right ahead, Mr. Hulfish, and I'll foller. If yo' gets scared, let out a yawp and take keer ob yo' — am yo'r razor in yo'r boot-leg?"

This taunt stung Cato to the quick. He had been playing the bravo before the big fellow, and, it cannot be denied, with much success. He couldn't afford to collapse at this stage of the proceedings. If he did, more than likely Jenkins would rouse himself to the point of browbeating him.

"What do yo' mean by talking 'bout me being afeard?" he asked scornfully. "I doan 'low no man to talk to me in dat style."

"Doan got huffy, Cate; I didn't mean nuffin. I knowed dat as soon as yo' sot dem eyes ob yo's on de ha'nted cabin, yo'd walk right up to de doah as bold as a lamb."

"Ob course I will; if yo's afeard to foller, stays whar yo' am till I comes out agin, I'll take care ob yo'."

No brave man could stand such taunts as Jenkins uttered; and Hulfish, screwing his courage to the highest notch and holding his breath, advanced toward the single door of the cabin, which he observed was opened a few inches.

He would have given all the wealth of which he was possessed to have been a score of miles away from the spot, but there was no help for it. He recalled the declaration of others that there are no such things as ghosts or spirit manifestations in this world, and tried hard to believe them. In fact, he attempted by every possible device to fortify himself, but with very little success. He was so scared that he was afraid he would drop down from that cause alone.

Meanwhile Jenkins was as near happy as he could be. The sly scamp moved his feet up and down so as to make it sound as if he was walking, but he did not advance an inch nearer the haunted house. In fact, he retreated somewhat, though still much closer to the structure than he wished to be.

Cato Hulfish was within a dozen feet of the door, and wondering whether he really could place his foot on the threshold, when he almost dropped in a faint.

Beyond all possible doubt he heard a groan from within the cabin!

He would have turned and fled in the very extremity of terror had he been able to do so; but he was so "paralyzed" by the awful unexpectedness of the thing that he could do nothing for the moment. The fact that there were ghosts within the little building which had borne that reputation so long was now established in his mind beyond all doubt.

It so happened that Jenkins, being a little farther off, and convulsed with laughter, did not hear the appalling evidence which transfixed his companion. He was almost as weak because of his excessive mirth; and, turning his back, he leaned over, slapped one knee, and threatened to collapse altogether.

"Dat's wuff walking four thousand miles to see!" he chuckled as best he could between his bursts of merriment; "talk 'bout pluck, why dat coon hain't got no more ob it dan" —

Had the African been looking the same way as his companion was, he would have seen a strange and alarming thing. The partly open door was drawn farther backward, and the outlines of something took form in the gloom beyond. That something swung an arm with lightning-like swiftness, and from its hand shot forth a bottle, turning end over end as it swiftly spun through the air, aimed with such unerring accuracy that it plumped straight against the back of the bent over and laughing Jenkins.

The fellow came bolt upright like a jumping-jack. His mirth vanished on the instant, and turning half way round, and seeing the missile lying at his feet, he called in a quavering voice, —

"Who frowed dat bottle?"

The shivering Hulfish was still gazing at the building and was unable to make reply.

"War dat yo', Cate?" faltered the other.

By this time Hulfish had partly recovered, and feebly turning round, he stammered, —

"No; it came out ob de cabin."

"Den it war de ghost! Gollynation! help! murder! fire!"

He made such a sudden bound that his hat fell off, and he was too terrified to pick it up. He ran through and among the trees shouting for help at the top of his voice, until far beyond sight of the terrible place.

The sight of his companion speeding off sent a thrill of renewed life through the frame of Hulfish. With a gasping cry he started in the same direction, and with a speed fully as great. He could not stop to look where he placed his feet when he was certain that a ghost was on his heels, and so it was natural that one of his boots should crash into the silk hat which lay invitingly with the opening upward. It was of large size, but would have been insufficient to admit the enormous boot had it not entered endwise.

It stuck fast, and getting mixed up with the other foot sent Hulfish sprawling on his hands and knees. Unable to kick it clear, he snatched it off with his hand, and so it happened that as he ran he carried the headgear with him, but in a much dilapidated condition.

Hulfish, though so much smaller than Jenkins, was really more fleet of foot, and he had not gone far before catching sight of him as he pitched over a fallen tree. By this time both were so exhausted that they dropped to a walk, which, however, was a hurried one, and was continued for some distance without a word being spoken.

"Cate," said his companion, "is yo' suah dat yo' knows de shortest way to Varick?"

"'Deed I is."

"Den let's took dat way."

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

For a time it looked as if everything conspired to help the schemes of the parties who were plotting some criminal deed.

When President Thornton left the office of Superintendent Starkweather, he was undecided in his mind whether he would send the fifty thousand dollars in gold on the three-o'clock train that afternoon, or by some other, if indeed he did not hold it over for a day or two. He was inclined to adopt the officer's suggestion; for the airy, confident manner of Starkweather had done much to tone up the somewhat timid financier. He was still thinking over the matter, when the alleged cousin of the railway man dropped in to hear whether the bank president had changed his mind. Mr. Thornton thought it rather early in the day to make the query, but did not know that it was not necessary in order to prepare for the shipment. At any rate, it was useless to debate the question further; and, as has been shown, he made his decision off-hand.

The understanding of the superintendent being that three o'clock was the time for the shipment, in the

event of receiving no notification, he so accepted it, on his failure to hear anything further from his friend during the day. Had the two chanced to meet before night, or had the time been fixed for the morrow, the clever trick would have been detected; but neither of those contingencies occurred.

The ruse of the short, heavy-set stranger gave him exactly the knowledge he wanted; and he telegraphed it to Grubb City, where his confederates received due and timely notice of the same. But for the performance, the stranger and his associates in Wareton could not have learned it until it was impossible to telegraph his partners in time.

Except for the promise of Superintendent Starkweather to Mr. Thornton, he would have answered the question of Jack Midwood, which was asked him within the five minutes following the departure of the bank president from the office. He was on the point of sending after him to request permission, but was deterred by the certainty that it would add to the nervousness of the worthy gentleman, and make him certain that a gang of criminals were awaiting somewhere along the line to rob the train.

Besides, the superintendent was just a little out of patience with his favorite clerk for propounding his question. The idea of such a peculiarly Western fashion being introduced into the East was so prepos-

terous that he did not want even to converse about it. Thus, while there may have been too much suspicion on one side, there was not enough on the other.

Meanwhile Jack Midwood was moving, and, by a singularly accurate bit of reasoning, struck several truths. It was sharp in him to interpret rightly the cipher dispatch; though he did not forget the fact already stated, that when one starts with a wrong theory he is surprised to find how well subsequent discoveries fit into it. Every step he took confirmed his first suspicion.

The deciding "pointer" with him was the information brought by George Washington Jenkins, who told in an incidental way about his seeing three men talking and drinking and holding some conference in the haunted house, the description of the one of whom he had a fair view leaving no doubt that he was Mugg Voorhes, the burglar. This, supplemented by the admission of Superintendent Starkweather that a valuable consignment would soon leave Wareton for the metropolis, scattered whatever doubts might have lingered in his mind.

Having been shut off from questioning his superior officer further, Midwood learned through the reply of the party to Voorhes's question that the treasure, whatever its nature, would start from the western terminus at three o'clock that afternoon.

Back of all this remained the possibility that the telegrams were in the nature of what may be called a double cipher; that is to say, they might require a second translation. Thus, when the sender said the "twenty-first," it was very easy for him to mean one or two or three days later. At any rate, he would not say precisely what he meant where there was any apparent cause to fear that the real meaning was likely to be detected. Then, too, "three o'clock," like the scriptural expression, "the third hour of the day," could have a very different signification from its seeming one.

But the labyrinthine maze of speculation once opened, the seeker after knowledge would be hopelessly entangled. He might go on guessing forever, with the result of drifting farther away from the truth all the time. There must be some basis on which to build his structure.

"The dispatches are so blind as they now read that Blivens would never dream of their import, and it was expected that they would pass through his hands. There are not many who would jump on to their meanings as I did, and I wouldn't have done it but for the suspicion roused by Mugg Voorhes's identification and his actions. I presume he was studying me to learn whether I am as big a fool as Bliv."

But the great question, admitting that he was right

in his theory, remained as to where the hold up would take place. President Thornton spoke the truth when he declared that the greater part of the ninety miles of railway offered an inviting field for such an outrage.

Fifty miles of the line lay to the east of Grubb City, and forty miles to the west. On which side did the train robbers intend to "get in their fine work"?

The presumption was that it was to the westward, for Midwood believed three of the criminals had been located there; but would it be at the station, or within one mile, or five, or ten? If it was to be to the eastward, he could signal the train when it reached Grubb City and give warning to the guards.

"But I'll be shot if I'll do that," he muttered, after turning the matter over in his mind. "I have been bluffed from making any venture to help those who are nothing in the world to me; and it may be, after all, that I am wrong, and the whole business is a lot of odd coincidences which sometimes occur in this life. What a champion dolt I would be voted! The superintendent would appoint me successor of Blivens as operator and agent at Grubb City. No; the thing mustn't be managed in that style."

These and many more cogitations passed through the active brain of Jack Midwood as he strolled along the path both before and after he met P. Cato Hulfish. It seemed to him that the only sen-

sible thing to do was to locate the haunted house, and seek some thread of information there. He had inquired of Jenkins so particularly as to where it stood that he was sure of finding it with little trouble. Leaving the trail, therefore, he turned off among the trees, and by a rare stroke of good fortune, went in a bee-line, swerving neither to the right nor left, until he caught sight of the little structure at no great distance ahead of him.

The instant he saw it he stepped behind the trunk of the nearest tree, and spent several minutes in studying the building, which something told him was to bear an important part in the stirring events he believed close at hand.

His conclusion was that the cabin had been built a number of years before (what Jenkins said about its long reputation as a haunted house confirmed that belief) by parties who used it as a hunting-box. The region, as has been shown, was still a desirable one for sportsmen, and must have been much better a generation previous. The building was composed of tree-trunks, and not more than a dozen feet square, with a single door, a window, and a peaked roof of logs and large limbs. Years of neglect left it in an uninviting condition, and probably it had not been used for a long time.

Midwood's first object was to ascertain whether

any one was inside, for much depended on that. He had come upon the front, and observed that the door was partly open. Had he believed there was an abundance of time at command he would have been more deliberate in his movements; but, waiting only a brief while, he advanced openly to the door and rapped on it. He was prepared with a story in the event of any one being inside. There was no response; and after repeating the summons and waiting a reasonable time, he stepped across the threshold.

His keen eye quickly took in his surroundings. The lower floor was simply a square room, with the roughest kind of table, and three stools that seemed ready to fall apart. This constituted the supply of furniture. At one end the ground, for there were no boards nor planking, showed where a fire had been burning not long before, the smoke of which had climbed upward to a hole in the roof. Inasmuch as this must have worked poorly, it was not to be supposed that the fire was used except in case of necessity.

One half of the apartment was covered by logs, stretched across at a distance of six or eight feet from the ground. This was undoubtedly where the occupants slept when they remained over night in the place.

On the table, which stood at one side of the

room, were a half-dozen empty black bottles, whose rank odor showed what they had contained, while the stale tobacco smoke still lingering in the air proved that the last occupants had not been gone long.

The window was a narrow aperture without sash, and too small for the entrance of any dangerous animal. When one wished to ascend to the upper portion, the task was not difficult, though he had to insert his toes in the depressions between the logs over the spot where the fire was burning, and grasp a knotty protuberance above his head. The distance was so slight that only a small effort was required.

Midwood felt that he was in a delicate situation, for there was no saying when the three criminals (as he was convinced the last occupants were) would return.

"If they catch me in here, there is likely to be a row; but then I have an advantage, as a fellow in a fort always has."

He instinctively slipped his hand back and found that his revolver was in place. It is the truth that but for the interests involved he would have welcomed a fight with the whole three. He could close the door — and his eyes flashed at the thought of the trouble those on the outside would have in dislodging him; but he felt the responsibility of what he was doing, or rather had set out to do.

A flagrant crime against the laws of the country was contemplated, and he meant to defeat it. Everything else must be subordinated to that.

It was easy to understand how this little cabin in the woods had acquired the reputation of being haunted. Any house standing by itself in the solitude, and unoccupied for a long time, is sure to gain a grewsome name among the simple country folk. The superstitious negroes especially would look upon it with eyes askance, and hold their breath as they hurried past.

But time was valuable, and it must not be supposed that the young man stood in the middle of the room and gaped about him while the minutes passed. Stepping to one end of the structure, where the ashes lay on the ground, he used his hands and feet vigorously, and the next minute his head was high enough to see what was contained in the diminutive half upper story.

There was little to see. A mass of leaves, twigs, and a couple of heavy blankets were all he noticed. His eyes roved around in quest of something in the nature of baggage, which he might examine for clews, but he observed nothing. The visitors were too shrewd to leave any tell-tale evidences behind them, for a sharp detective needs but slight evidence to evolve the truth.

"But for those blankets I would not believe they intended to come back," thought Midwood, holding himself in place, with his head and shoulders above the level of the floor; "but they won't be apt to go off and leave them."

Letting go of his support, he dropped lightly to the ground, and once more stood in the lower or main apartment.

"They ought to have left some trifling clew," he muttered disappointingly, as he peered around the dimly lighted apartment," "but I can't detect anything."

The fear that one or more of the party might take it into his head to come back caused him to keep a constant lookout. As he moved about the interior, he peeped out of the partly open door every few minutes, and listened intently for the first indication of their approach.

The rustling of leaves suddenly warned him that some one was coming. He peered through the crevice at the back of the door, and saw P. Cato Hulfish and George Washington Jenkins in a line, and timidly drawing near. One glance at the ashen face of the smaller individual told the truth. He understood everything; and he could no more resist yielding to his waggery than he could stop breathing. The reader knows what took place.

CHAPTER XV.

THE EAVESDROPPER.

JACK MIDWOOD laughed until he sank upon the nearest stool. The sudden impact was too much for the support; and it crashed, letting him upon the ground, whereupon he abruptly stopped his mirth.

"I'm glad neither Cato nor George Washington saw that, or they would have the laugh on me. That isn't the worst of it."

His belief was that some of the men would soon appear, in which event he intended to skurry to the upper story in the hope of overhearing something to his advantage. Perched there, with his revolver, he would not have cared if there were twice as many; he would command the situation.

But the broken stool was likely to put them on their guard and defeat his purpose.

Examining it, he found that one of the three legs had snapped off close to the seat itself. In breaking, it had left a hundred needle-like points projecting from each side of the fracture. These fitted so exquisitely that when he had pressed the

broken limb together the eye could hardly note where the rupture had taken place. The stool looked as if nothing was the matter with it, and so long as it was left alone it was as good as either of its companions.

"If they do come back, one of them will plump down on that, and there will another crash. I don't think they will suspect that I would be mean enough to play a trick like that on them — that is because they don't know me very well."

The young man looked again at the ashes on the hearth. He fancied he saw a white object among them, like a scrap of paper. Hoping that there might be something worth his attention, he was in the act of stooping to draw it out when he caught the murmur of voices — the criminals were returning.

Midwood went up the primitive stairs like a monkey. Nimble as he was, he had barely time to ascend and crouch on the blankets when the three men entered. The first one to speak was Mugg Voorhes, as was readily told from the sound of his voice,

"I guess everything is right," he said. "Bill sent word that the thing would start at three o'clock this afternoon. He'll be on the train, and what's to hinder?"

This query was addressed to his two companions,

known respectively as Tom Gibbs and Hank McCutcheon; while the stockily built young man who had got the needed information so cleverly from President Thornton was referred to as Bill Ringgold, and they formed as precious a quartette as ever "did time."

"I don't see anything to cause fear," returned Mr. Gibbs, who was somewhat addicted to using large words; "but you have heard the old adage about there being many a slip atwixt the cup and lip, which reminds me."

He must have produced a bottle or flask, probably from his clothing; for the man up-stairs heard the gurgling of the fluid and the smacking of lips.

"As I was about to observe," continued Mr. Gibbs, "as the Spanish proverb has it, the plane will, when started right, work fairly; but a break at the start spoils it irrepar" —

There was a crash at this moment. It so happened that Mr. Gibbs had located himself on the disabled stool, which gave way without warning, and let him heavily to the ground. The others naturally laughed; and, with an angry imprecation, he joined in, though it is not to be supposed with equal enjoyment.

He mended the stool just as Midwood had done, and gingerly seated himself again, inasmuch as it was the only support at command. All he had to do was

to be careful, and it would serve him as well as any of the others.

"Do you know," continued Voorhes, "that I've often wondered why this thing has never been done before? There's just as good a chance here as in Arkansas, or Kansas, or Texas, or farther West."

"The section couldn't be more favorable; but after the thing is over, it isn't going to be an easy job to get out of the country."

"Bah!" exclaimed McCutcheon, who shared the views of their leader; "what's the odds? We've got our horses waiting down in the hollow, and by daylight we can be twenty miles away. Then we've only to separate. We can change our clothing, bury the stuff, and come back and get it when the flurry is over."

"Your observation is logical," said Gibbs; "but we must move with the utmost promptness and vigor, and when the blow is struck be equally expeditious in leaving the vicinity."

"I don't think we'll hang around here long after we've hit it as rich as we're bound to."

"However," continued Gibbs, "it's useless to talk about the risks involved, now that everything is arranged. That was a mighty clever way in which Bill and the boys found out the time the filthy lucre was going to leave Wareton."

"They haven't been able to tell us about it," said Voorhes, "but they will when we meet; it can't be cleverer than the way Bill got onto the money being sent in the first place, and I learned that fifty thousand dollars was to be forwarded, and that it was to be in gold too."

Of course everything said was heard by the young man above. He listened closely, hoping that one of the parties would refer to the means by which the original intention of shipping the specie became known to these scamps. Apparently some one in a confidential position had been used by them, and it was important to learn who this traitor was.

To Midwood's disappointment, however, the reference was not made, since the matter was no secret to any one of the three. The conversation took another trend, and the young man smiled when unexpectedly he found himself the theme.

"I was disapp'inted," said Mugg Voorhes, "when I went down to the station last night and found that that big lunkhead wasn't there; but that a young chap that looks like a girl was walking up and down the platform as though the road belonged to him, which might have been the case without his being very rich. The sight of that young jackanapes sent a shiver through me."

"How was that?"

"I thought somebody had dropped to our game, and had sent him down to block it. I took a good squint at him before I went in and sat down for a talk, for I was suspicious. He seemed to be mighty clever in his way, and treated me white."

"That's true," thought the grinning young man upstairs; "but I notice you are not inclined to go into particulars, Mugg."

"You don't apprehend that Blivens, as I believe his cognomen is, entertains any suspicions?" asked Tom Gibbs.

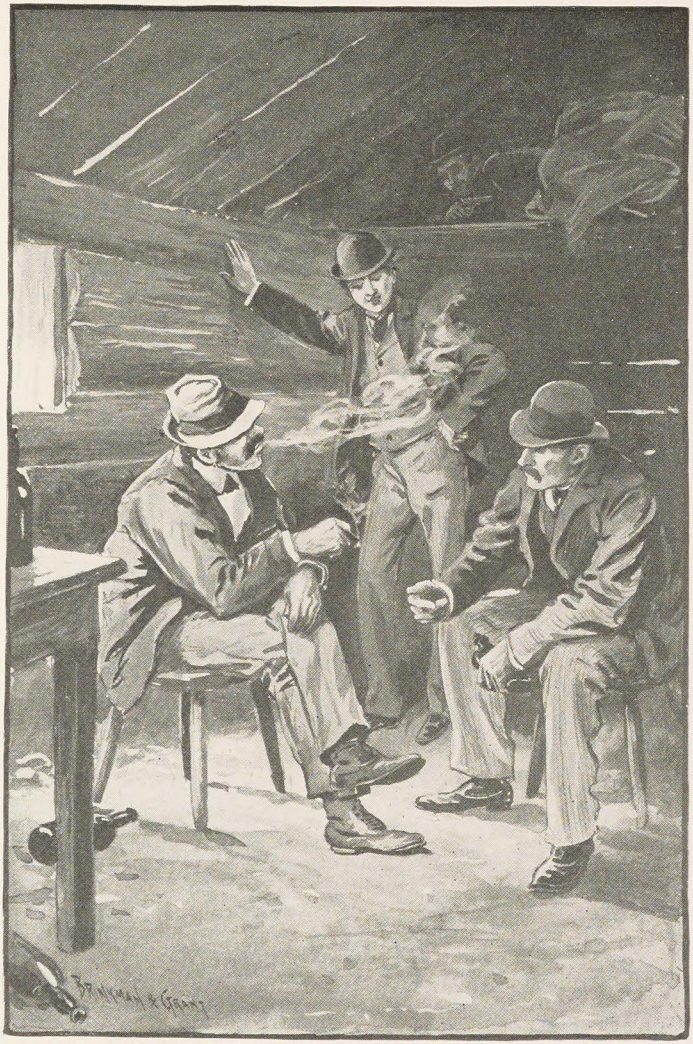
"Heavens, no!" replied Voorhes with a sniff of disgust; "he's the champion fool of the State and country. He's nothing but a big calf, and would have sent anything we wanted without ever dreaming what it might mean."

This remark gave Jack Midwood a pleasant thrill. He did not want to feel any doubt about Blivens's honesty, and the words just uttered proved that he was clear of any such charge. He was above suspicion henceforth, even though he was stupid.

"Let's see," said McCutcheon, "if the train leaves Wareton at three, what time is it due at Grub City?"

"The regular running-time is an hour and a half for the trains that stop there; but the express doesn't stop, and it must go by at about four or a little after."

"What is the distance?"



"Of course everything was heard by the young man above."

"Forty miles, as near as can be. This isn't the fastest road in the universe; but I think their Thunderbolt express, as they call this line, ought to grab ground well enough to make it within an hour or a little more."

"I don't know whether it wouldn't have been better," said Gibbs thoughtfully, "if it was scheduled to take place later, so that we might have the protection of the darkness."

"Maybe if you'll telegraph that old fussy president of the bank, letting him know your wishes, he'll make the change," was the sarcastic comment of the leader.

"You misapprehend the purport of my remarks, which were in the nature of a general observation. We can't always have things as we want them in this world; but there is no law, so far as I am aware, which prevents any one expressing his wish."

"But what's the use?" growled Voorhes. "Any way, I don't see how it could be much better. Night won't be far off, and we shall have all the more time to make tracks."

Jack Midwood was all nerves and eagerness.

"Why don't they refer to the spot where they mean to hold up the train?" was his impatient thought, for as yet they had not indicated it even in the most indirect way.

But if he did not hear what he wished, he soon

caught something that was enough to startle any one in his situation.

"It's about a mile to where we have left the horses," said McCutcheon; "and I don't suppose we'll want to come back here again."

"Of course not, for that would be a waste of time."

"Then, we might as well bring down those blankets, and take them with us."

"Yes; we're likely to need them."

Jack Midwood softly drew his revolver, convinced that he would require it within the next few minutes.

CHAPTER XVI.

BUILDING BETTER THAN THEY KNEW.

GEORGE WASHINGTON JENKINS and P. Cato Hulfish traveled hard until they were obliged to stop from exhaustion. Both had done a good deal of tramping before their hasty flight from the haunted house, but when they ceased they were well beyond sight of it.

Each had made such an exhibition of fright that it was useless for them to try to hide the fact. Jenkins was no more terrified at the apparent prompt acceptance of his challenge than he was by what had taken place at that dismal place in the woods in the presence of the supernatural.

"I tell you, Cate," said he, after panting a few minutes on the fallen tree where both had seated themselves, "ghostes am a good deal awfuller now than they used to be. Why, when dat one heaved dat bottle at me, it come like a cannon-ball."

"Get out! he frowed it at me! I felt de whizz ob it as it war coming and dodged it. If I hadn't done so, it would hab tooken my head right off my shoulders."

"War dat de way yo' come to smash my tile?" asked Jenkins, taking off the battered hat and ruefully examining it.

"Wat yo' talking 'bout? I didn't do dat. De hobble-goblin reached out one hand, whar yo' dropped de plug, and frowed it at me when I started to run after yo': dat's what smashed it. I picked it up and fotched it along."

Jenkins wanted to believe what his companion said, but the expression of his countenance indicated doubt.

"Howsumever, Cate, de ting am done, and we's alibe; so when we got to Warick we won't say nuffin' to nobody."

"I'm agreeable. Ghostes ain't de kind ob critters dat any one wants to run agin, and yo' don't neber cotch me going near dat spooky place agin. I'll walk round it, if it tooks me a week."

"So'll I," was the emphatic comment of Jenkins. "Yo' don't 'spose dat ting will foller us?"

And he cast a furtive look back over the trail, along which they had come with headlong speed.

"Pshaw, no," replied Hulfish, whose expression was less confident than his words.

"I tinks dat we had better be moving," added the other, rising to his feet with a sigh of weariness; "I've busted one ob dem patent leathers," he added, looking

regretfully down at his enormous understandings; "by de time we gets to Warick I'll be barefooted."

"Den yo'll be comfor'able. See yah, Wash, what yo' said 'bout dat ghost chasing us may hab some sense in it. I guess we had better leabe de path."

"It'll be hard work tramping frough de woods."

"We'll took to de railroad; it ain't fur off."

The proposition struck the other favorably, and was acted upon without delay. The winding course of the faintly marked trail sometimes ran close to the rails, and sometimes it diverged to a considerable distance in the woods, having been made a long time before the railway was established. It happened that at the point where the two left it, it was necessary to walk at least a couple of hundred yards to reach the embankment, along which the Thunderbolt express was soon to pass.

They found the undergrowth quite dense, and soon began the descent of a hollow, at the bottom of which wound a small stream, the bank ascending again on the other side. The source of this stream being a number of miles back among the mountains, it passed under the railway track by means of a stone culvert, for it was necessary that the outlet should be wide, high, and strong, inasmuch as sudden floods sometimes made a rushing torrent of what at dry seasons was but a mere rivulet.

The two friends were familiar with the locality, and knew where they had to go in order to climb the bank of the railway. Jenkins was a few paces in advance, and neither had any fear or misgiving, when the former abruptly stopped, with the exclamation :—

"Gollynation! what does dat signerfy?"

Peering over his shoulder, preparatory to making another break for life, Cato Hulfish saw six horses, all fine-looking animals, saddled and bridled, and each tied to the limb of a tree or to a sapling. It looked as if their owners had left them but a few minutes before, and expected to return in a brief while. The bits had been slipped from their mouths; and the strap by which each head was secured was so long that they could readily crop the buds about them, and had considerable freedom of movement.

It was a singular sight to come upon in the woods, and the Africans could not be blamed for standing several minutes with open mouths and silent tongues. Cato was the first to regain his self command.

"Whar de mischief do yo' 'spose dey come from?"

"And who does dey b'long to? and what am dey hyar fur? and, as I obmarked in de fust place, what does it signerfy?"

"Bress my soul, if I know!"

"Nor does me. Cate," added Jenkins, after a moment's pause, and with a smack of his thick lips, as

if in the presence of some delicacy. "I wonder if dem critters ain't lost."

"Shouldn't wonder."

"Dem's fine lookin' hosses," he added, stepping a little closer.

"Dat's as suah as yo's bo'n."

The majority of Africans in our own country are excellent judges of horses. They naturally admire the finest quadruped that was ever created, and are adepts in managing them. After the first shock of surprise this admiration asserted itself.

The two approached the steeds, which showed some nervousness at sight of the strangers; but the men uttered soothing words, patted their necks, and quickly placed them at their ease.

A nearer acquaintance increased the delight which the couple felt at first sight of the animals. They were blooded, fleet, intelligent, and highly valuable.

They looked into their mouths, and Jenkins said:—

"Dar isn't one ob 'em dats more dan six yeah ole; dey's all runners, and can trabbel a mile in less dan two minutes wid yo' or me on dar backs."

"Dem's my sentiments."

"Cate, didn't I obmark a few minutes ago dat dem critters looked as if dey war lost?"

"I tink yo' done say dat."

"I repeats dat observation; what do yo' tink?"

"I see an obspression 'bout dar eyes like a hoss dat am lost and dunno what to do wid hisself."

"Look clusly, Cate; seems to me dat dar am a yearning obspression as dough dey am axing for a couple ob colored gemman to come along and find 'em. Look clus, and tell me what yo' really tinks."

Cato spent several minutes scrutinizing the face of each horse in turn, as if hunting for something of whose existence he held considerable doubt. Suddenly his ebon face burst into a glow.

"Yo' am right! It am dar! If dey could speak dey would say, 'We am lost, and if yo' don't hab pity on us, and took us whar we can hab peace and quiet, we'll die.'"

"Cate," said Jenkins, his eyes larger than ever, as if he feared his whisper would be overheard, "whar shall we took 'em?"

"Hum, ob course; I hope dat dat Miss Pursciller Smith will be dar when we arrobes."

"Why?"

"We'll each ride into town on two hosses; my legs am long enough to stretch across two of 'em at a time and so am yo's."

"How'll we doot wid de saddles?"

"Easy 'nuff! Hab yo' furgot all 'bout yo'r horse-ridingship? Habent yo' seen de circus man ride fibe or six as easy as rolling off a log?"

"But dey don't hab saddles," said Jenkins doubtfully; "we can put one foot in de stirrup on de near side, and de oder in the stirrup on de off side ob de oder, but de hosses will hab to walk mighty clus. S'pose, just as all am gwine well, one ob de hosses shy at de sight ob her ugly face, we would drap sudden like or split into twins."

"Dar won't be any trouble 'bout dat," replied Cato, who had already begun unfastening the animals and placing the bits between their teeth; "we'll practice fust so dey won't shy. Dar's only one ting dat I's afeard of."

"What's dat?"

"Why, dat de owners — dat am de folks what luff dese hosses hyar — should accidentally wander back dis way and find 'em agin afore we got out ob sight."

This was cause for fear indeed; and, before proceeding to the extreme measure that had come into the mind of the couple simultaneously, they looked around among the trees and listened. Nothing but the soft gurgle of the stream at their feet, and the gentle sighing of the wind among the limbs, was audible; nor could the sharp eyes, peering in every direction, detect a sign of any living creature besides themselves and the coveted animals.

It would have been foolish to attempt to ride the

horses while among the trees, where the only means of progressing was by picking their way. They preferred this, so long as no advantage could be taken of the fleetness of the animals; for, on the appearance of the owners, they could let go and run to cover, while their situation would be less compromising than if in the saddle.

So Jenkins took the lead, Cato bringing up the rear with the other steeds walking obediently between; and thus it was that the two colored individuals builded better than they knew.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE MOVE.

JACK MIDWOOD'S coolness never served him better than when he was crouching in the upper part of the haunted cabin, listening intently to the conversation of the plotters below.

The instant he heard the proposition of one of them to secure the blankets over their heads, the young man noiselessly lifted the couple, and placed them as near to the open space as he could without their tumbling over. Then, standing as far back as his cramped quarters would allow, he quietly awaited, weapon in hand, the development of events.

There were no windows in this portion of the building, the only light which entered being through the hole in the farther corner of the roof, intended for the escape of the smoke, and the slight illumination from the lower room. A man, standing motionless where he located himself, would not be noticed unless another looked directly at him.

McCutcheon was the party who started to get the blankets. He had climbed a couple of steps when

he placed his hand on the upper flooring. As he did so it came in contact with the articles.

"Helloa!" he muttered; "that's good."

A twitch at one brought it into his grasp, and he gave it a toss so that it fell near the middle of the lower room and clear of the ashes. The second was similarly handled; and then, descending a couple of steps, he dropped lightly to the floor without having caught a glimpse of the young man that was watching him like a ferret from the moment his head and shoulders came into sight until they disappeared.

Midwood could not have asked a better view. He saw the smooth, almost boyish face, but with the stamp of dissipation plainly showing even in the twilight of the room. He could not recall that he had ever seen it before; but he knew he would never forget it, wherever encountered again.

"I hope they won't leave without saying something worth hearing," was the thought of the young man, as he shoved his weapon back in place, silently approached the open space, and stooped down, so as not to lose a word of what passed.

"It's a little past noon," remarked Voorhes, "and time we had lunch; and being as we ate everything we had this morning, we'll have to make it up out of liquid refreshment."

"Which is an excellent substitute, when the opportunity to do better is denied," replied Gibbs.

Then the bottle or flask, as it might be, was passed around, and the men certainly did not seem to feel the deprivation of their solid food.

"Helloa! what's that?"

It was McCutcheon who uttered the query. The shrill sound of a locomotive's whistle broke the stillness.

"There's no train due now," said Voorhes.

"It must be an extra that's going through."

"I wonder if she can be taking the boodle?" was the dismayed query of McCutcheon.

"Hardly," was the reply of Gibbs.

Midwood heard not only the whistle, but the faint roar of the extra, as it passed swiftly from the direction of Wareton to Barmore. Duty required that he should be at the station, for possibly there might be some word for him; but it couldn't be helped now, and he gave the extra no further thought, though he partly suspected that it might bear the treasure which was the inciting cause of the meeting underneath him.

The party was silent a minute or two, and then the rustling of paper was heard. Mugg Voorhes had brought out something, and spread it on the table before him and the others, while all were evidently examining it with interest.

"You see," he explained, "there's where the horses are; as soon as the job is over we swing into the saddle and are off."

"But we can't do much horseback traveling in the woods," suggested McCutcheon.

"What's the need of it? We'll follow down the stream till we strike the path; we go along that to where another one turns to the left; a little way along that, and we reach the highway, where we'll begin to travel. By daylight we'll be a good many miles away. We can bury the boodle, for I've fixed on the spot, each go his own course, and come back a week from to-day, dig it up, and then take things easy for a few weeks; for we'll want that long to blow it all in."

"And right there is the spot where the hold-up is to take place?" inquired Gibbs, laying his finger on the paper.

"That's it; you see, we'll be within a hundred yards or so of where the animals are waiting, so we won't have far to fall back."

"There's no danger of the horses getting away?"

"I rather reckon not," was the confident reply of Voorhes; "you noticed how carefully I tied 'em, and they might stay there a month without anybody seeing them."

Could the leader of these rogues have had a look

at the animals at that moment in charge of George Washington Jenkins and P. Cato Hulfish, he would have revised his opinion.

The information for which Jack Midwood had waited so impatiently had come at last!

When the men spoke of the little stream of water he recognized the spot. He had noticed the culvert more than once as he rode over it; for it was the only one within five miles of Grubb City. It could not be that the trio intended to select any other place which would necessitate a long tramp through the woods? No; he was convinced that the all-important secret was revealed at last.

"Well, we've got to wait several hours," said McCutcheon, "and how slow time goes when anything of the kind is on foot! You recollect, Mugg, when we had everything fixed to crack the Southumberland Bank at eleven o'clock, and you wouldn't let us move till two in the morning? It seemed to me that those three hours were a week long."

"We must learn the virtue of patience in our profession; if I hadn't had it while I was working my way for two weeks out of the Indiana penitentiary, everything would have been spoiled."

"I found that out a couple of years ago, when I was jugged at Harrisburg."

"A beautiful sentiment," observed McCutcheon,

"and one that should be your guiding star through life. I have always been patient"—

"And never have been scooped in," interrupted Voorhes, "Oh, you're a lucky dog, Hank; but your turn will come one of these days."

"I hope that I shall conduct myself so circumspectly that the strong arm of the law will never again descend upon me," remarked Gibbs, with an assumption of meekness like that of Uriah Heep.

By this time Jack Midwood was convinced that the party below were as precious a trio of miscreants as any within the walls of a penitentiary. Their conversation proved that they had committed many grave crimes; and although one of them seemed to have escaped punishment, he deserved it, probably, as much as his companions.

Midwood was desirous of hearing more about the other individuals in Wareton, especially the one to whom he had sent a telegram for Voorhes and received a reply. He was hopeful, too, that some intimation would be given of the person who evidently held a situation of trust and was in communication with the gang that intended to commit a daring robbery.

To his disappointment, however, the references were so general that he could fix upon no one; though without any clear data he formed a half suspicion that the traitor was an employe of the First National Bank of Wareton.

"But he'll keep," was the philosophical conclusion of the young man. "He isn't of much account just now."

The conversation continued in the vein given for a couple of hours longer. It was not important enough to record; though the eavesdropper up-stairs found it entertaining as well as interesting, for he learned more about the three worthies than he had ever suspected. Mugg Voorhes had "done time" to the extent of fully twelve years, having broken out of two penal institutions in the West; but though he tried it farther east he failed, and was compelled to serve out his full term.

Gibbs had spent only a short time behind walls, all of it being in the Southwest, where he admitted he had been engaged in business like that now contemplated. The results, however, of train-robbing were discouraging in that section, and he had ventured on this bold stroke to recoup his fortunes.

McCutcheon gave evidence of education, and had conducted his wrong-doing with so much shrewdness that he had not yet been called to an account.

Matters had progressed thus far, when, without any warning, the very information that was lacking came to Midwood. He was glad to learn that no employe in the bank at Wareton had given any information to the criminals. Bill Ringgold and two

confederates were operating entirely alone. The former got his clew from a remark dropped by President Thornton on the street to a friend that he contemplated something of the kind. Ringgold had been dogging the officer for days in the hope of picking up some valuable information, his object in Wareton being really to ascertain whether the First National of that place offered an inviting chance to "burglarize." If it did, he meant to send for the rest of his confederates who were lurking in the neighborhood of Grubb City. While still prospecting, he learned of the intended shipment of the coin, and then the plan of holding up the train was formed. The scheme was so simple of itself, that it was quickly perfected. The tedious hours finally wore away. The party had partaken from the flask several times, but no one was perceptibly affected thereby. They were too wise to make that mistake; and when they filed out of the door of the cabin, they walked as steadily as Jack Midwood himself could have done.

There were enough crevices in the old structure for him to watch them as they moved slowly away, like persons aware that they have a good deal of time at their disposal, and consequently in no hurry to reach their destination.

"They wouldn't walk in that style," thought Mid-

wood, "if they had very far to go; for it is after three o'clock, and the express will be along in less than an hour."

He waited until they were a considerable distance, when he descended, dropping lightly to the ground, where he paused for a minute or two, to learn whether the paper which Mugg Voorhes had been displaying to his friends had been forgotten. The owner, however, was too careful to make any such blunder, and carried it away with him.

Midwood felt that he must now prevent above all things the trio from learning of his presence. If he should attempt to follow them while they were in sight, discovery was inevitable; for it was not to be supposed that three such veterans in crime would tramp straight forward without once looking behind them. The detective who figures in the story-books would have sneaked along so close behind them as to overhear every word. The criminals would be obliging enough to reveal their whole plans, and allow a stranger to whisk about at their elbows without once seeing him; but that is not the way things work in real life.

The young man never stepped outside of the haunted cabin until several minutes after the party had vanished from sight. Then, when he did so, he walked more slowly than they were going when last seen, and

he kept a sharp watch to the front, ready to dodge to cover the instant he caught a glimpse of one of them.

Should they find that some one was shadowing them, they would be sure to turn and bring him to quick account. While he had no personal fear, he knew that the little performance pending would be spoiled. That was what he wished to avoid under all circumstances, for what he anticipated could never take place.

In addition to his revolvers, each man carried a Winchester rifle, while McCutcheon had one of the blankets and Gibbs the other. Altogether, though they were insignificant in numbers, they formed a formidable party.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"THE WIRE TO THE EAST HAS BEEN CUT."

At about half-past two o'clock that afternoon, an express-wagon halted in front of the Wareton First National Bank, and two men entered the institution. They were sturdy fellows, who had built up enormous muscles from banging and breaking trunks, and lifting heavy packages and such things. So, although the strong box in the bank weighed several hundred pounds, they carried it without difficulty, and deposited it in the wagon, which drove off at a walk in the direction of the railway station.

President Thornton donned his hat, and, swinging his cane, kept pace with the vehicle by using the pavement. He held the receipt of the express company for the valuable consignment, and therefore had nothing to fear in the way of a loss either to himself personally or to the bank; but he was anxious to have the gold go through safely, and was a little impatient with himself because of his nervousness over the matter.

"I know Carman will smile when he sees me," he reflected, as he paused at the station, and waited for

the men to wheel the box down on the truck to the platform, there to transfer it to the express-car in waiting. He was permitted to go outside, for he was well known to every one about the station; and he walked up to the car where the messengers, Joe Martin and Jim Warren, were attending to the trunks and express matter.

"Helloa! what have we here?" asked the former; "that looks as if it might be gold," he said with a laugh, with no thought that he had hit the truth.

"That's just what it is," said President Thornton in an undertone; "there's fifty thousand dollars; but perhaps it would be well not to speak quite so loud," he added, noticing that several passengers were lounging about.

"I beg pardon," said Martin; "but it really makes no difference. You can count it certain that the stuff will go through all straight so far as the W. G. C. & N. is concerned, unless we have a smash-up."

"I hope so," remarked the president, who, despite himself, was growing more nervous than before. "I suppose you don't allow any strangers to ride in the express-car with you?"

"Not much! If you wish to sit on the box with a revolver, Mr. Thornton, we will let you."

"Bless me! I never fired a pistol in my life. I would be more likely to shoot you or myself than

any robber. But here is something to pay you for keeping both eyes open."

He handed a five-dollar note to each; but to his surprise they declined with thanks.

"We don't need it, Jim and me; we always go well heeled, and it is against our principles to accept a fee like that."

"Well, you must feel rather lonely in these parts," laughed the president, forming an admiration for the two men, whom he had known from boyhood, and who, he was aware, had made a creditable record in the Civil War.

He was astonished to see the ease with which they swung the heavy box into one corner, where it was out of the way; but he truly concluded that there is a knack in the way of doing such things, by which all waste of strength is saved.

Five minutes before it was time for the train to start, the smiling superintendent came out on the platform. He shook hands with Mr. Thornton, and remarked inquiringly, —

"Well, it is aboard, is it?"

"Yes, it is going to start all right; it remains to be seen where it will fetch up."

"You have no misgivings, have you?"

"I suppose, Carman, I am foolish, but I can't shake it off. I shall be relieved to hear that it is

safely at Barmore; for beyond that I don't apprehend any danger."

"Nor before it either. If you feel uneasy you can come into my office and wait, and I will give you an account of its progress along the road."

"I believe I'll do it, if you'll agree not to laugh at me."

"I won't until word comes that it is safe at Barmore, and started on the R. T. line to New York."

"Well, you may laugh at me then."

They waited on the platform until all the passengers were aboard; and in response to the signal of the conductor the engine steamed ahead, and the Thunderbolt express started on the most memorable trip in its history. Then the two walked inside, and seated themselves in the office of the superintendent.

"Victor," said Mr. Starkweather to one of the young men, "tell the agent to telegraph me the minute the express passes Varick."

"Yes, sir."

"Send similar word to Mr. Midwood at Grubb City."

"I have tried to communicate with him several times, but he seems to be away from the office."

"That is odd; I wonder," he added with a smile,

"whether another bear has paid the place a visit. Mr. Blivens was scared away by one," he explained to the bank president. "Doubtless he will be back before the train reaches that point, and you will communicate with him."

The two lit their cigars, and sat down for a chat. Rather curiously neither referred to the message which the bank official had sent to his friend earlier in the day by a man representing himself as a relative of the railroad superintendent.

Meanwhile the instruments continued ticking outside, Mr. Starkweather having disconnected his own so as to prevent any interruption to their conversation.

They talked for a time about everything except the treasure on the train, for the railway man wished to keep Mr. Thornton off the subject except when it became necessary to refer to it.

Something over half an hour went by, when Mr. Victor presented himself at the door, saying respectfully, —

"I beg pardon, but Frazer has just sent me word from Varick that the express passed there three minutes ahead of time."

"Thank you; the Thunderbolt seems to be making good progress; it is fifteen miles farther to Grubb City. Now, if you please, call up Mr. Midwood."

"He isn't there," said Opdyke from his key. "I've been calling him for the last ten minutes."

"That is strange," remarked the superintendent with slight impatience; "it is so different from his usual carefulness. I wonder whether anything can have happened to him?"

"What could have happened to him?" inquired Mr. Thornton.

For the first time since this matter had been brought before him, Superintendent Starkweather felt a touch of misgiving. He recalled that the young man had made a direct inquiry of him that morning about the intended shipment of specie; and though he could not see the connection, nor did he deem it best to refer to it in the presence of the bank president, he began to think something might be amiss after all.

"It is hard to account for one's feelings," remarked Mr. Thornton, as his friend resumed his seat; "but if I hadn't sent you word this forenoon, I would have changed my mind, and held the money until to-morrow or the day after."

"What do you mean? The understanding was, that, if you didn't notify me to the contrary, the gold would go as you originally intended — that is, by the express at three o'clock."

"I know; but Mr. Whitfield said you would like

to receive positive knowledge. I presume you had some arrangements to make."

The superintendent's face indicated his surprise.

"Whom are you talking about? Who is Mr. Whitfield?"

"Your cousin; the gentleman who is spending several days at your home with you."

"Thornton, I believe you or I am intoxicated; and I am sure I was never more sober in my life."

"Why, not long after I left you this morning a gentleman called at the bank and introduced himself as Mr. Whitfield, your cousin, who was making you a visit. He said you would like to know if I had any word to send him."

"And what did you do?"

"I wrote you a note saying that the money would be sent in accordance with my first intention, and as it has been sent."

"Well, all I have to say is that I never knew any person by the name of Whitfield; that I have no cousin or any one else making me a visit; and that I haven't received a scrap of writing from you to-day."

"What does it mean, Carman?"

"It was a trick"—

At this juncture Opdyke appeared at the door.

"Excuse me," said he, in evident agitation; "but Frazer has just sent word that the wire to the east

has been cut. He can get no message either to or from any point beyond."

"By gracious!" exclaimed the superintendent, "you were right after all, Thornton; the train is going to be robbed for the sake of that gold! Not only that, but we can't raise a finger to prevent it!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE EXTRA.

SUPERINTENDENT STARKWEATHER and President Thornton stood on their feet staring in silent amazement at each other. They had good cause for their excitement.

"Carman," said the bank official grimly, "I don't see any smile on your face."

"Thornton, this is no laughing matter. A trick has been played upon us. There is a plot afoot to rob the train; and, as I said a minute ago, we can't raise a finger to prevent it."

Strange that now, the thing being established, the hitherto nervous bank officer was the cooler of the two.

"What can't be cured must be endured; all we can do is to sit still, grin, and bear it. Sooner or later we will get news of what is done to-night, and, Carman, it will make mighty interesting reading."

"It is the strangest thing I ever knew."

"Why not send to Varick, and get some of them to start down the road and do what they can to check the robbers?"

The superintendent dropped in his chair, connected his instrument, and was about to act upon the suggestion, when he checked himself.

"It's no use trying that; the news would throw the whole place in commotion; and, before they could make any move, the rogues will be miles away with their plunder."

"Can't you reach Grubb City by a roundabout course?"

"That might be done," replied the superintendent, "though I don't see what it will amount to. I can get a dispatch through by Reaville, Burton, and then back from the New York office."

"Try it; no harm can result."

After considerable delay the not unusual feat was accomplished, the circuit being about ten times as extended as by the direct course. Word was returned that there was no response to the call for the operator at Grubb City. The line seemed to be open, but he was not in his office.

"Thornton," said the superintendent, looking around at him, "what do you suppose Midwood meant by asking me this morning whether any valuable shipment was soon to be made over the road?"

"He must have heard something suspicious. What answer did you make?"

"I told him 'yes.'"

"Anything more?"

"He asked for particulars; but I declined to give them, because I had promised you to say nothing of our intentions."

"That was undoubtedly right; but it's a pity you didn't tell him more. I think we would have learned something ourselves that would have been of use. How would it do, Carman, to send a special after the express?"

"I have been thinking of that, but I see little hope in it. A strong force is needed. If the sheriff were ready with a posse we might get there within an hour after the stoppage of the train, which would be too late; for those fellows don't lose any time when they have that sort of business on hand. But, since it is the only thing to be done, we'll do it."

Railway men are accustomed to act promptly. The superintendent communicated with the sheriff's office by telephone. He was reported out, but not far off. He was sent for, and appeared at the telephone within the next ten minutes. Mr. Starkweather told him the situation, and asked how soon he could have a posse of men ready to follow the Thunderbolt express on a special. The officer, after some hesitation, replied that he hoped to be at the station in the course of half an hour with six or eight men. The railroad official replied that the train would be ready, and

then issued orders for the same to be made up without delay.

"As I figure it," he said, resuming his seat with his friend, "at the very best it will be close on to two hours after the stoppage of the express before the officers can reach the spot. By that time the robbers will have secured the plunder and be miles away."

"But they can be pursued."

"If it were earlier in the day there would be hope of overtaking or heading them off, but they can get a good start; and, as you said this morning, there is a big stretch of wild country in which they can take refuge. They are evidently old hands, and will take every precaution. I am hopeful, however, that they will be run down before they get far away."

"With slim chances of recovering the money."

"What difference does that make to you?"

"None, except that I am humiliated that such a crime should succeed in this part of the country. What do you suppose has become of Mr. Whitfield?"

"More than likely he is on the express, and will take a hand in holding it up, as the expression goes."

Rising from their seats, the two gentlemen passed

out on the platform to learn how the special was getting along.

"I sent the best engine on the road to Barmore some hours ago," explained the superintendent, "to bring up the directors to-morrow in the president's private car; but they have given us No. 63, which is almost as good."

The engine named backed into the station with a single car attached. It was in charge of one of the best engineers on the road, and was capable of making excellent time. All that prevented the immediate starting was the delay of the sheriff and his posse.

He did not keep them long waiting. Sooner than he had promised he appeared at the head of half a dozen lusty fellows, all fully armed and ready for any duty. They came on the double-quick, and their passage through the quiet streets of Wareton naturally caused considerable commotion. They hurried into the single passenger car, and everything was quickly made ready.

"Carman," said Mr. Thornton, when the start was about to be made, "what do you say to our going along?"

"Have you any weapons?"

"Fortunately nothing but my penknife."

"I always carry a revolver."

"I would feel safer if you left it behind, but I'll take the risk. Is it a go?"

"Get aboard, and I'm with you."

Much to the surprise of the head policeman of the county and his deputies, the couple took their places in the car, which immediately steamed out of the station, and started on its long run to the scene of the contemplated robbery.

"It strikes me," said Mr. Starkweather, after the start had been fairly made, "that the best place for me is on the engine. Will you go along, Thornton?"

"Thank you, I prefer to remain here."

"If you'll excuse me I'll go into the cab with the engineer." This individual happened to be Dick Devins, with whom Jack Midwood had made the trip the previous day to Grubb City. He turned his head and nodded to the superintendent, who seated himself on the fireman's box, without either uttering a word. Both were railway men, and there was no call for either speaking: they understood the situation.

By this time the early autumn day was drawing to a close. The sun had set, and the gloom of approaching night was stealing through the dense woods, which stretched away on either side of the rails. The engineer had been told what was in the

wind, and he understood that he was to run as fast as was safe. No one knew better than he what that meant; and he soon had No. 63 plunging along at a rate which renewed the nervousness of Mr. Thornton, made the sheriff and his men somewhat uneasy, and occasionally produced a start on the part of the superintendent himself.

When Devins looked across the cab at his superior officer, the latter shook his head warningly; but the grim engineer smiled as if to assure him there was no cause for alarm. He had been over that road at as great a pace more than once before, and he was no more eager to risk the lives of others than he was to imperil his own.

As nearly as may be, the special started from Wareton about an hour and a half after the regular express, for the superintendent had taken the alarm as soon as he found the telegraph wire was cut. It would take, perhaps, a quarter of an hour to pass the distance to the point beyond Varick where there was reason to believe the express had been stopped. In fact, since it was probably thirty-five miles or more, the time consumed would be fully forty-five minutes; for the express trains on this single track could not make the speed they do on many of the leading lines of the country.

But Dick Devins pumped all that could be got

out of No. 63, and she made excellent time. She gave a long, resounding blast of her whistle, as she spun around a curve, and caught the light of Varick station in the distance. This was twenty-five miles from Wareton, and the engine shot by in just thirty-one minutes from the moment of pulling out from the first station.

This was faster than the Thunderbolt express, and the superintendent was inclined to order the engineer to abate the speed at which he was going; but he was anxious to land the sheriff and his men on the spot at the earliest moment, believing that if the first attempt at train robbery was stamped out in the way it ought to be, the crime would never become epidemic in this section of the country.

"Do you see that?" abruptly called the engineer.

The superintendent nodded his head. He had caught sight of the object, which was the red light on the rear of the last car of the Thunderbolt express, which was standing still on the track.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO BRAVE MEN.

It was singular that Superintendent Starkweather and President Thornton, in their anxiety over the attempt to rob the train of the large amount of gold, lost sight of the bravery of the two men whose duty it was to guard against that very thing.

Joe Martin and Jim Warren, as has already been intimated, were the couple in charge. They were powerful, determined fellows, both of whom had made an honorable record in the Civil War, and who had learned that loyalty to their superiors was their first duty. They had served in a similar capacity in Texas and Arkansas, and knew thoroughly well the peculiar dangers which often attend those who have the care of valuable treasures.

While neither believed that anything of the kind was likely to occur on the run from Wareton to Barmore, they always were prepared for the contingency. Not only were they armed with revolvers, but each kept a loaded Winchester within reach, and allowed no stranger in the express-car while en route.

The latter was fitted up in the usual style. A

door on either side was opened by sliding back, while those at the rear and front moved on hinges. They were narrow; and across the windows in the upper part were stretched a number of strong iron rods. These doors were kept locked on the inside; and when an employe wished to enter, he could do so only by giving a peculiar knock recognized by those within.

The sides of the express-car were thick enough to be bullet-proof; so that it might be considered a diminutive fort on wheels, capable of a stout defense, provided the garrison possessed the nerve to make it.

The heavy iron safe stood in one corner, and, instead of being locked by a combination, was accessible through a large key, which one of the agents carried in his pocket. On this particular afternoon it was in charge of Joe Martin.

The trunks were piled at the other end of the car, and were numerous enough to fill fully a third of the space; while the squat, heavy box with its freight of gold helped to cramp the quarters of the agents. The safe was intended to contain the valuable packages while in transit; and it had its share of bonds, papers, and several lots of jewelry. The gold, however, was too bulky to be stored in the iron structure, and, as we have shown, rested in the strong box made

specially to contain it. The space within was just filled by the fifty canvas bags, each of which contained one thousand dollars' worth of the precious yellow metal.

After the start from Wareton, the couple had work to do in adjusting their checks and way-bills. This was soon completed; and the friends lit their brier-wood pipes, and sat down on a trunk to await whatever might be coming.

"Jim," said the other, who was busy sending palpitating rings of tobacco smoke towards a hook on which hung a cluster of trunk tags, "do you know that if we started over the Iron Mountain road, or almost any of those lines down that way, and it was known what a pile of boodle we had with us, we would be held up as sure as fate?"

"No doubt of it; it wasn't often that the boys made such a good haul as they could make here."

"I wonder sometimes why they don't try it up this way, for they couldn't want a better chance than on the W. G. C. & N."

"I believe it will be done one of these days; we mustn't forget to keep our eyes open. Now we have a run of a good many miles through a country as wild and sparsely settled as many of those districts where the gangs used to work their sweet will."

"But," said the other, referring to the difficulty which had been mentioned by others, "it would soon be known, and the hunt become so mighty hot that the fellows would be pretty certain to be run down."

"The chances are that way; but the risk is no greater than in robbing a bank or a large store, and that is continually done in the East and North."

"That is a different matter; for I have heard a criminal say that if he did any crooked work in New York City, the best hiding-place he would ask is in the same town. He would never want to venture out of its limits while the hunt was going on."

"But if the thing were done here, the rogues must first get to one of the large cities; and there's where the rub comes in. No," added Jim Warren, "I don't think there's much chance of our having a brush with any of those people."

"I sometimes half wish something of the kind would be tried," grimly added Martin.

"Wherefore?"

"Oh, just to stir up things. This humdrum work gets to be monotonous. I don't understand how the messengers are always so quick to throw up their hands when commanded."

"That's because they are lacking in sand," was the significant reply of Warren. "I've looked down

the muzzle o_ a loaded Winchester myself, and I can tell you it cools one's nerves wonderfully."

"No doubt; but what are the fellows doing while some one is adjusting that Winchester to their eyes?"

"In my case," laughed Jim, "I was asleep."

"And yet, pard, if I recollect right, you made a good fight, and the chap who tried to hold you up was the one that went down."

"Well, I don't take credit to myself for that; I knocked the muzzle aside instinctively, and got the drop on him before he had a chance to fix things."

"If you can do it, why can't anybody else?" was the conclusive question of Martin.

"Well, in the first place, I hadn't any business to be asleep; though I had been on duty for twenty-six hours, and I couldn't fight it off, try as hard as I might."

"Then you weren't to blame for slumbering; but we both had a good eight hours' sleep last night, and I reckon we can keep our eyes open till we reach Barmore."

"There, I beat you!" called out Warren with a laugh; "I put three rings over that nail before you got one."

"Just keep quiet and don't disturb the air by your boasting, and I'll do it," replied Martin, who for the next five minutes devoted himself to the

task of encircling the nail with the little rings of vapor which he carefully shot from between his lips. When at last he succeeded, he laughed, and was as pleased as a schoolboy.

"Now," continued Martin, pursuing his half-jocular vein, "what would be easier than for us to arrange with some of these fellows to make a pretence of resistance, and then surrender that box and the key to the safe under compulsion? They would be glad to give us half of the plunder, and who could bring us to task?"

"Yes," said Warren; "persons in our situation have plenty of chances for that sort of thing, and some of them probably do as you suspect; but I can never understand how they are such fools."

"Why are they fools?"

"They forget that there is a hereafter; they may carry off enough money to live in luxury for a few months, or perhaps years, but they can never get away from conscience."

"Suppose they have no conscience, or it is asleep?"

"It may be asleep, but it is sure to awake; and, if they escape the hand of the law, they cannot escape God. I tell you, old chap, that no one can escape Him," added Jim Warren impressively. "Now, suppose that I should make such a bargain with those fellows, leaving you out of the question. I could take,

say, twenty-five thousand dollars, and so invest it that I might be comfortable for the rest of my life — that is, so far as money is concerned. But there's a little cottage in Barmore which I hope wholly to own in the next three years. In that cottage is the best little wife that ever lives" —

"Excepting mine," interjected Martin with a smile.

"We'll rate them the same. My blue-eyed Polly believes in me. I have never said a word or done a thing to wound her feelings, and she would die before she would deceive me.

"In that same little cottage," continued the grim fellow, as the moisture gathered in his eyes, "is little Nellie, my only child, for the boy sleeps on the hillside. When he was dying he placed his little arms around my neck, and said, 'Papa, you taught me to be good and told me about heaven. I am going there; and you and mama and baby Nellie mustn't wait long before coming to me.'

"Joe," added the strong man almost fiercely, "do you think I could walk into that home, meet my trusting wife with a kiss, take my little Nellie on my knee, and hear her tell me how she had tried to be good, and how she prays for me night and morning that I might be good too — I say, do you think I wouldn't stand up and let both of those hands be burned off before I would do a thing to weaken

the trust of that wife, and grieve the heart of that Nellie, who believes her good-for-nothing father is the best man living?"

By way of answer, Joe Martin, swallowing a lump in his throat, silently rose from his seat, and stepping across the floor, extended his hand to his comrade. Not a word was said as the warm pressure continued for several moments. There was no need of words; they understood each other.

Meanwhile the Thunderbolt express was steaming along at such a high pace that, as we have stated, it shot by Varick station several minutes ahead of time. Everything indicated a good run over the entire ninety miles between Wareton and Barmore.

Tom Tumbridge was one of the veterans of the road; he and Dick Devins having charge respectively of the two trains known as the Thunderbolt express. The engine of the latter went into the repair shops at Wareton that morning, which explains how Devins took the throttle of the extra, bearing the superintendent and the sheriff and his posse in such hot haste over the same route on the trail of the express.

An engineer and his fireman have little to say to each other when on duty. The noise of the engine is a bar to conversation; and, besides, there is rarely occasion for an exchange of words. Each has his

work and responsibility; and to discharge them properly he must concentrate his attention upon them. Sometimes, when the assistant has had considerable experience, the engineer will turn the locomotive over to him for a time while he keeps watch of his way of handling the reins of iron horse. Then the younger one soon has the privilege also of doing the "drilling" at the end of each run, and thus becomes familiar with the management of the engine.

Soon after passing Varick, where the road became comparatively straight, Tumbridge turned his head and nodded to the fireman, who, without speaking, stepped across the cab and took his place, with his left hand resting on the lever.

"Keep her where she is," said the engineer; "she's traveling at about the right pace, and will drop down a little beyond Grubb City."

An inclination of the head signified that the fireman understood and would follow directions. Tumbridge seated himself on the other side, where he could ring the bell when necessary, and keep watch through the window in front of him.

The ponderous engine was pounding along at high speed. Leaning inward like a race-horse coming around a sharp bend, she struck a long curve, which rapidly straightened out, as the fireman peered through the glass in front to catch sight of the several miles

of straight track, still visible in the declining light of the autumn afternoon.

Instantly he saw that something was wrong. What looked like a tree lay across the track, with the certainty of derailing the engine, unless it was checked in time.

The sight rattled the fireman, who grasped the reversing rod with both hands, and with one vigorous wrench brought it clean over backward. Almost at the same moment a thunderous report rang out, and something shot from the front of the locomotive like a cannon ball, whizzing to one side among the trees. It was one of the cylinder heads, that had been blown off by the terrific strain suddenly put upon it.

"Fool!" exclaimed the wrathful Tumbridge, as he flung the panic-stricken fireman aside, threw forward the reversing rod, shut off steam, applied the air-brakes, and then, reversing again, admitted the vapor partly into the cylinders, while he measured with his eye the distance remaining to be passed before striking the obstruction.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE "HOLD UP."

It was a close call, and only the coolness of the engineer averted an accident. The remaining cylinder head was sufficient to hold the driving wheels almost stationary, and the air-brakes gripped so rigidly that the rapid and shuddering cessation of speed of the cars startled every passenger, and threw several forward in their seats.

It was remarkable how quickly the swiftness of the engine and train diminished. The distance between it and the fallen tree was alarmingly slight when Tom Tumbridge grasped the lever again; but he managed it so well that a final halt took place with the nose of the pilot within six feet of the log.

"How the mischief did that get there?" he called out, addressing no one in particular. "Some one must have"—

He was right; "some one" had had a hand in it. The wheels of the engine had hardly ceased to revolve, when a masked man sprang from behind one of the trees, ran lightly up the bank, and was

on the locomotive in a twinkling. He carried a revolver and Winchester rifle, and there could be no doubt that he "meant business."

"If you get off your engine," said he with an imprecation, "I'll blow a hole through you."

"What do I want to get off for?" queried Tom in turn; "my place is in the cab."

"Don't you touch that tree till we're through, and you won't git hurt. Stay where you are."

"All right," returned the engineer, sitting down and adjusting matters as best he could, so that the engine would not suffer during the enforced stop. It was blowing off steam, and the furnace door was drawn back to relieve the tremendous pressure on the boiler.

The train consisted of three passenger cars, besides the express. There was no sleeper, for the run did not extend far enough into the night to make it necessary. Just a moment before the train came to a standstill a man in the front of each car sprang to his feet, opened the door, and placing himself in it, was seen to have his face covered by a mask. The metamorphosis was made so cleverly that none of the drowsy passengers knew what was going on until the stranger displayed a revolver in either hand and called out in a loud voice:—

"Every one who keeps his seat won't get hurt;

the first one that moves will have the top of his head blown off!"

The whole thing was so sudden that some minutes passed before the people comprehended what was going on.

Seeing evidences of a growing panic, the guards explained in the same loud tones that no person in the car would be robbed or interfered with, provided he "behaved himself" and gave no trouble. The objective point of the criminals was the express-car.

This assurance hardly accomplished its purpose. By the time the passengers discovered that the train was actually held up, most of them were in a panic. They began shoving their money, watches, and valuables under the seats, and wherever any chance offered for concealing them. One man in the rear car tried to clamber out of a window but the space was too small, and when the guard sent a bullet whizzing within an inch of his head, he concluded to remain in his seat.

At the same moment that the three passengers assumed their terrifying character, and the stranger clambered upon the engine, two others similarly masked climbed upon the express-car, one at the front and the other the rear.

A vigorous kicking followed; and the one next to

the engine, who was immediately joined by the confederate that had placed the engineer and fireman in subjection, shouted, —

"Open that door! If you don't, we'll riddle you. We have been in this kind of business before."

"So have we, pard."

It was Joe Martin who made this answer, punctuated by the discharge of his Winchester, the jingling of glass, and the howl of the man who staggered back off the platform and toppled to the ground, clutching vainly but wildly at the railing as he went down.

The name of this individual was Mugg Voorhes; and, as he limped away from the track and down the bank, he must have felt a conviction that he had made a little mistake.

Tom Gibbs, his companion at the front of the car, dodged to one side when he received this proof that the expressmen meant to fight; while Hank McCutcheon kept up his kicking at the rear, adding some well-meant advice: —

"You can't help yourself; we've got you dead to rights; let us in, and we'll act square."

"Come in if you want to," called back Jim Warren, on the alert for a glimpse of the miscreant's countenance; "why are you standing out there in the cold?"

"Are you going to let us in?" shouted the impatient McCutcheon. "If you don't, we'll go through every one in the train."

"Go ahead," was the imperturbable reply of the expressman; "if they haven't any more sand than to stand it, they ought to be robbed."

"We'll shoot the engineer and conductor," added Gibbs, who was heartless enough to do it.

"Nobody is holding you," replied Joe Martin.

At this moment Jim Warren, who heard the threat, retreated a few steps, so as to speak to his companion.

"Do you suppose they'll do anything like that?"

"I don't believe it; but I don't know."

"If they make that the condition we had better let them in, and fight it out here."

This was an important proposition; for it meant a voluntary surrender by the couple of the great advantages they possessed, and a settlement of the fight by a hand-to-hand struggle. Such a contest meant, too, the death of one or more of the parties engaged; but Joe Martin and Jim Warren would not have hesitated had they been assured of fair play.

If the robbers were admitted, they would secure the gold after a desperate fight; for they far outnumbered the couple, and were fully armed. If this resistance were not made, and the property quietly

handed over to them, more than likely they would turn about and shoot the expressmen out of mere wantonness, or on the principle that dead men tell no tales.

The most hateful feature of the business was that it involved a surrender, something which Martin and Warren could not bear to consider, though the threat that a refusal would cost the lives of the two principal officials of the train was enough to make them shudder. Joe Martin thought fast and hard.

"I don't believe they dare do it. Anyway, we'll wait a while."

"See here," added his companion, as if the thought had just struck him, "if they try that sort of thing, we'll take a hand."

"How?"

"The moment they start to hurt any one, we'll open the door, jump outside, and have a little of the sport ourselves."

"You're right! I didn't think of that. I wish this fellow in front would give me a chance at him," added Joe. "I'll hold a little parley; and the minute I see an opening, I'll wing him."

He leaned his rifle in the corner, and, with his revolver grasped, placed himself close by the door, where no one could see him. Tom Gibbs, it will be remembered, stood there.

He was still kicking and shouting for the door to be opened, and repeating the threat that had been made.

"Hold on there!" called Martin; "let up for a minute."

"Well, why don't you let us in?" demanded the criminal.

"We don't intend to."

"We'll batter it down, and then you'll take the consequences."

"What might they be?"

"We'll shoot you both."

"And while you're in the shooting business, what do you suppose we'll be doing?"

"It don't make any difference what you do; we've got the drop on you; we'll not only clean you out, but we'll shoot the conductor and engineer."

"Suppose we open the door and turn over the boodle to you, what then?"

"We'll take it, that's all, and clear out."

"You won't hurt us?"

"No; I'll swear to that if you act square."

"We've got a pile in here; can't you afford to divvy?"

"Yes; we'll give you a part. Come, we won't wait; we've thrown away too much time now."

"Well, I'll see you eternally hanged, drawn, and

quartered before we let you in. If I was sure your brother thieves would show fair play, I wouldn't ask anything better than to step outside and settle this with you."

The reply of Tom Gibbs was accompanied by an expression which it would not do to print. In his fury at the unexpected rebuff, he turned about and deliberately leveled his rifle at poor Tom Tumbridge, the engineer. The miscreant meant to carry out his threat, though the engineer did not at first read his purpose.

Before the outlaw's finger pressed the trigger, the sharp report of a revolver rang out, and with a gasp the man lunged off the platform precisely as Mugg Voorhes had done a few minutes before. The difference in the two cases, however, was that Tom Gibbs, after falling, never got up again.

Another peculiar fact is to be noted: the shot which brought him down came from among the trees at the side of the track.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PARTY OF SEARCH.

THE fall of the second train-robber was so unexpected that it caused something like consternation among the rest. Two had gone down, one the leader, while the other would never rise again, and nothing had been accomplished.

In the flurry of the moment, only one person noticed the significant fact that the second shot was fired by some one down the bank and among the trees, the last quarter from which anything of the kind was expected.

"By gracious!" exclaimed Joe Martin; "there's some one out there who is helping us."

"Impossible!" replied his companion; "it cannot be."

"Neither you nor I fired; there isn't any weapon on the engine, and the only way any one could reach him is from the woods."

"You're right," admitted Warren; "but what friend can we have there?"

"I'm blessed if I know; but we'll find out."

Inasmuch as there were trees on both sides of the road, and the crack of the revolver had not been

precisely located, one of the expressmen drew the door a few inches to one side, and the second did the same on the other. It fell to Joe Martin to learn the explanation of the astounding occurrence.

"Come here, Jim," he whispered; "I see him."

Warren leaped to his side, and peeped out.

"Where?"

"He's right behind that large tree off a little to the left; I caught a glimpse of his head a minute ago — look!"

"Why, that's Jack Midwood!"

"It is, as sure as you're born; he has nerve."

At this juncture Hank McCutcheon thought it necessary to hold a brief consultation with his friends. He dropped down from the rear platform of the express-car, uttered a sharp whistle, and the three men who had been keeping guard instantly joined him. Thus a group of four stood together within a few feet of where the expressmen were peeping out.

"Jim," whispered Martin, "let's slide back the door a little farther and take a whack at them."

"Hold on! look at Midwood."

The young man had noticed the gathering of the quartette of outlaws, and, dropping on his knees so as to hide himself, he began creeping up the bank toward them.

"Wait and see what he does; if he needs any help we'll give it. Isn't he a cool one?"

A minute later the top of Jack Midwood's derby showed a few inches above the bank. He was seen to extend his right hand, and the next moment there came a puff of smoke and a whip-like crack. McCutcheon staggered backward, but did not fall; and the hat and weapon dropped out of sight.

This third effective shot threw the criminals into a panic. The three ran pell-mell down the bank and among the trees, with the fourth limping after them. Then they vanished, leaving one of their number stretched lifeless beside the track. Let us follow them for a few minutes.

When they had fled some way, the three unhurt ones paused beside their leader, who was seated on the ground, groaning with pain.

"Are you hit hard?" asked Bill Ringgold.

"I should say I was. I didn't count on anything like that. Where's Gibbs?"

"He got his last sickness."

"I don't see McCutcheon."

"Here he is," replied that individual, hobbling along as best he could. "I was winged, too, and don't know who did it."

"Well, boys, this job looks like a failure," remarked the leader with an ugly exclamation. "Let's

get down to the horses and make tracks; give me a little help. I think I can ride after I'm lifted into the saddle."

"Where are the animals?"

"Not far off down in the hollow there."

The miserable group straggled down the slope and between the trees to the spot where the six animals had been picketed some hours before. Not one was there.

A hurried consultation was now held as to what should be done. Night was closing in, during which they must secure their safety or it would be too late. But for the presence of the two wounded ones, this would not have seemed difficult; but the couple could not travel fast, and, indeed, as it was, could not go far, even with the help that their companions were inclined to give.

The only thing feasible was that they should be assisted to the nearest dwelling, and there left to be nursed, until able to take care of themselves. This involved much risk, for it was certain that by the morrow the officers of the law would be on their track, and knowing that two were hurt, would make close search for them. But necessity compelled the course, and it was adopted.

Mugg Voorhes had spent enough time in the neighborhood to become familiar with it. This he

deemed important, in order to fix the line of flight after the commission of the crime. An old couple dwelt within a half mile of the spot, and the wounded leader gave his companions direction; so that in the course of an hour (for many and prolonged halts were made necessary by their condition) they reached their destination.

An old couple without children lived in the humble dwelling, and, as it was beginning to grow dark, the old lady was preparing the evening meal. They were startled by the approach of the party supporting a couple of wounded men, but when they learned what was wanted, cheerfully agreed to do all they could, without the promise of liberal pay that was made to them.

The company were hungry, and the odor of the cooking food impelled them to remain and partake of the meal, which it was promised should be shortly ready. Voorhes and McCutcheon were placed, one upon a couch, and the other in a rocking-chair; and the old lady, who knew as much as the majority of country doctors, assured them that, though they had been severely hurt, a few days' rest would bring them around.

"We'll stay a while with you," said Ringgold; "but you can see that the rest of us must light out before daylight."

"That's all right," replied the leader, who felt much easier now that he was able to assume a prone position; "but I would like to know what became of those horses."

"Somebody has run them off."

"It's a big loss," growled Voorhes; "for they were blooded animals, and could out-travel anything in this part of the world. I'd like to get a chance at the thief that took them."

"It's no use of fretting over that now," replied Ringgold, who could afford to feel some complacency, inasmuch as he had not received a scratch, though the attempted hold-up of the train had ended in disastrous failure.

He and his companions resolved among themselves that they would stay long enough to secure a good meal, when they would scatter in different directions, and each look after his own safety. Believing they would have a number of hours in which they were secure against pursuit, they were naturally hopeful of getting off before the hunt could be organized.

They were so far from the railway that they did not notice the noise of the special train which followed the express, or, if they did hear it, supposed it was made by the one which they had attempted to hold up.

Meanwhile, matters were in an interesting shape in the immediate neighborhood of the Thunderbolt express.

The hurried flight of the law-breakers gave the passengers and train employes a chance to recover their wits, which they were quick to do. In the midst of the chattering, passing to and fro, and exchange of experiences, the figure of Jack Midwood straightened up behind the bank, and he came forward just as Joe Martin and Jim Warren flung back the side-door of their car and jumped to the ground. The three men came together, and were quickly joined by the engineer, conductor, brakeman, and a number of the passengers.

"That was the best thing I ever saw," called out Martin, grasping the hand of the youth. "You picked off that scoundrel a-laying there truly beautiful."

"I think you or Jim did something of the kind yourselves," replied Midwood, blushing under the admiring glances of the group, which continually grew in number.

"But it couldn't begin with yours," said Martin, "for we were under shelter, and you weren't."

"I had a tree."

"But you hadn't when you fired the second shot; you were in the open air."

"The bank hid me. I tell you, folks," said Midwood, glancing with a shudder at the inanimate figure which a couple of brakeman were lifting into the express-car, "I hate to kill a man; but it seemed to me there was no help for it in that case; and I had to be pretty quick about it too."

"So you did," said Martin, who, like every one, felt a strong admiration for the plucky youth. "That wretch swore he would kill Bob, the conductor, and Tom, there, if we didn't let them into the car; I thought it was only bluff, but the first thing I knowed, he had his gun p'inted at Tom, and he was in earnest."

"I had no idea what the fellow was up to," grinned the engineer, "or I s'pose I would have felt a little creepy."

"I saw it," added Midwood, compressing his lips, "and knew what he meant. There wasn't any time to argue the matter with him, so I let fly."

"It was a good shot," observed the conductor, who knew nothing of the skill of the young man; "but you didn't do so well with the other, for he got away."

"I did exactly as I meant to do," said Jack, just a trifle nettled by the insinuation; "I sent a bullet through his leg, above the knee, and it will lay him up for a while. There was no necessity for killing

him, or I would have done it. You will observe there was a difference in the two cases."

"But we don't intend to stay here all night," remarked the engineer; "let's get that tree off the track, and we'll make a start for Barmore. Sam here was kind enough to blow out one of the cylinder heads, and we shall have to limp the rest of the way. We'll get there after a while, though we'll be late."

"Yes," said a frightened passenger; "we can't be too expeditious either, for those fellows are likely to come back again."

"I hardly think so," said Midwood dryly, as he glanced around in the gathering gloom. "If they do, we'll try to take care of you."

"Thank you; I haven't asked your help," retorted the passenger, hurrying back to his seat in the car.

Midwood, who had watched the movements of the criminals, said that they cut the telegraph wires between that point and Grubb City, so that no dispatches could pass either way. With the aid of an ax they felled a large oak directly across the track.

The train-hands made a concerted effort to lift and swing this clear, but could not budge it. Without attempting to hunt up the implement the criminals

had used, Tom Tumbridge brought his ax from the engine and began plying that.

The task was tedious, and he took turns with his fireman, while the rest looked on, and were quite free with advice. Finally the work was finished, and the huge chunk of wood was rolled to one side, and the rails cleared.

At this moment, when the passengers began hurrying back to the cars, a whistle sounded to the westward.

"By gracious!" exclaimed the engineer; "I forgot to send a brakeman back with a light."

"You didn't have the chance," replied the conductor, as he hastened to the rear of the train and began swinging his lantern at the other engine, whose headlight glowed like a star in the gathering gloom.

But Dick Devins was looking out for the express, and, after passing Varick, he felt his way around the curves with the care of a veteran who knows the probable consequences of a moment's forgetfulness on his part. When, therefore, he caught the gleam of No. 63's signal, he came to a halt within a rod of the last car.

He had hardly done so, when the sheriff and his deputies scrambled out, and President Thornton was but a few seconds behind them. A few minutes sufficed to explain the situation. The criminals that had attacked the train were six in number. One

had fallen in the affray, and of those who fled two were wounded.

"Boys," said the sheriff, "we must get every one of them; they can't be allowed to escape. We must make this train-robbing business so unprofitable that it'll never take root in our soil."

"That is a most commendable resolution," observed President Thornton; "and I hope you will earn the large reward that is likely to be offered for the capture of these men, but the chances are against success, with the night only fairly begun."

"They may dodge us for a while, and it is hardly likely that we shall get them all, but we can try. Boys, most of you know the country pretty well in these parts, and now's the time to learn more. If you come upon any of them and need help, fire a gun, and we'll understand it. Scatter!"

It was amusing to observe the promptness with which this command was obeyed. The posse might well have declined to follow the orders of the officer who had temporarily taken charge of them, especially as the attempt was likely to be attended with personal danger, but the hint thrown out by the bank president was the inspiring cause.

"That's what makes them so vigorous in prosecuting the law," remarked the sheriff with a grin. "A reward is one of the best tonics I know of."

A brief consultation took place on the part of the officer, the railway superintendent, and the bank president. Mr. Starkweather was willing to hold No. 63 at the command of the sheriff as long as he wished. It could be run down to the switches at Grubb City, and kept there for service when needed. But, after all, little was to be gained by this course. There was no saying when the criminals would be captured, if indeed they were captured at all. Their captors might strike the railway at some point miles to the east or west, where the extra could be of no use to them. Finally the business was put in shape by the declaration of the superintendent that he would instruct all trains to halt and take aboard any of the men that appeared with a prisoner, no matter at what point on the railway.

Shortly after this, the passenger train began rumbling eastward toward Barmore, while the extra carried Jack Midwood westward, until Grubb City was reached. There he left the car, and took charge of business again. His absence had not affected matters to any extent, for the engineer of the express knew the cause of his absence from his post.

Superintendent Starkweather had promised to send a young man to take his place in the course of a day or two.

"I wish he would hurry up and do so," mused

Jack, as he entered his rude little house, re-lit his lamp, and found things as he had left them. "I have a feeling that the most important part of this little affair is yet to come, and I would like to take a hand in the wind-up of the business."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"HONOR AMONG THIEVES."

When brave men associate together in some venturesome enterprise, a strong feeling of comradeship generally brings them close to each other, and makes each willing to risk life for the sake of the rest.

But there was precious little of that sentiment among the evil persons who attempted to hold up the railway train, as already described; for, like all criminals, most of them were cowardly by nature, and, with one exception, — to be noted presently, — devoid of anything of a chivalrous turn in their makeup. The moment that the essay ended in a failure, the object of each was to save himself from the consequences, with little care as to what became of the others.

They helped Mugg Voorhes and Hank McCutcheon to the house of the old couple, where all received kind attention, because it naturally came in the way of the people to act the part of good Samaritans. But when they had procured their evening meal, the well and strong bade the wounded good-by, and departed.

Voorhes said nothing, for he knew that he would have done the same, had their situations been reversed. McCutcheon, who had more manhood in his composition, was disgusted, for he would not have acted as did they. He was too proud, however, to protest. It gave him a taste of the baseness of his associates. His face paled a little, but he compressed his lips, and held his peace.

"The boys will have trouble because of the loss of the horses," remarked Voorhes, leaning back in his chair, with his bandaged limb resting upon another. "The hunt will be a hot one; and more than likely they'll be caught within the next twenty-four hours."

McCutcheon was reclining on the lounge in the dining-room. The housewife had done what she could for both of her visitors, who were quite comfortable. Her husband sat on the other side of the fire, smoking his pipe, seemingly paying little heed to what was said or done.

"I wouldn't want any better chance than to be mounted on my black mare, and with the start the night would give me," replied McCutcheon.

"What would you do?" asked Voorhes.

"I would ride her for all she is worth, straight back into the country, keeping away from the towns, and out of reach of the telegraph. I would find some

other family among the mountains, where I could stay in hiding for a week or two. Then I would make up as a country gawk, saunter down to some railway station after it was dark, and be off. It is as easy as rolling off a log."

Mugg Voorhes shook his head.

"It wouldn't work. They've got the telegraph going by this time, and the hunt half-begun. You wouldn't get the chance you 're talking about."

"What is to become of us here?"

"It's hard to tell." Then glancing at the old man, who was still silently smoking, the leader of the criminals added: —

"I don't know whether we could hire the old fellow to hide us for a few days."

It was McCutcheon's turn to shake his head.

"They might feel willing to forget the nature of our business; but the trouble is, that if they were willing they couldn't hide us in any place where we wouldn't be certain to be found. No; I have about made up my mind, Mugg, that our turn has come to be jugged."

The words of the young man made the older one uneasy. He fidgeted a while, and then carefully lowered his wounded limb, so that the foot rested on the floor. Then he stood on his feet.

"What are you going to do?" asked McCutcheon in surprise.

"I think I'll take a look outside to see how matters stand. Some of those fellows may be prowling in the neighborhood. I won't be gone long. I see you have a good heavy cane there."

The last remark was addressed to the old man, and was in a louder tone than before. He looked around, stared a moment, as if waiting for the meaning of the words to filter through his brain and then nodded his head: —

"Yes. I sometimes have the rheumatiz purty bad, and have to use a cane."

"May I borrow it for a while?"

"Sartingly, sartingly," replied the old gentleman, springing to his feet and handing the implement to him; "you won't be gone long?"

"Only a few minutes; I merely want to get a breath of fresh air."

McCutcheon watched his companion with a peculiar expression. When he had limped out of the door and closed it behind him, his not unhandsome face assumed a contemptuous look.

"He thinks he is fooling me, but I know Mugg Voorhes better than he suspects; that's the last of him, unless some of them gather him in."

McCutcheon was right. Mugg Voorhes did not return. He had concluded that the safest place for him was somewhere else.

"So I'm left alone," grimly muttered the younger. "I don't know that it makes any difference where I am, for there's precious little choice at a time like this. I'm half inclined to follow him."

Pondering for a minute or so, he addressed himself to the old couple: —

"It is more than likely some persons will call here before long and inquire for us. My friend and I have had a little trouble, and do not wish to meet them. If they do come, will you tell them we have not been here?"

The honest faces assumed a horrified expression.

"Why, that would be a falsehood," fairly gasped the old lady; "we couldn't do that, for it would be wicked."

McCutcheon saw the mistake he had made, and deftly extracted the shaft that wounded them so deeply.

"Certainly that would be wicked, and I would not dare ask you to do anything of the sort; but, if you can mislead them, so that they will think I am somewhere else — that is, mind you, without your telling a story, why, it will be a great favor to me."

"We would like to oblige you," remarked the old man; "and if there's anyway we can do it without offending our conscience, why, we'll do it" —

He abruptly stopped in his words, and a look of

dismay came over the faces of all three. Footsteps were heard outside, and almost before they knew what they meant, a resounding knock struck the door.

The watchful McCutcheon knew the caller was not Voorhes, for he would not have paused to knock. Besides, there were two men, and neither was walking with a cane.

"Wait a second," he whispered, springing to his feet and hurrying into the adjoining room, forgetful of his weakness.

He had barely time to do this when the summons was impatiently repeated.

"Come in!" called the old lady, in accordance with the custom of country folks.

The door was immediately shoved open and two men strode forward. They belonged to the sheriff's posse and were named Catesby and Emerson. While most of the others were scouring the woods singly, these two hunted together for the fleeing criminals.

"Have you any strangers here?" asked Catesby, the taller of the two.

Despite the dislike of the couple to telling an untruth, the look on their faces was a more forceful negative than any words could have been.

"Strangers!" repeated the woman; "what do you mean?"

"I don't see any trouble in knowing what we mean. Have you had any callers this evening?"

"Yes," replied the husband; "an hour or so ago several men came here, and we gave them shelter and supper, though they paid us well for the meal. From the way they talked, I fear they have been doing something wrong."

Catesby and Emerson were interested on the instant.

"They're the ones we're looking for; where are they now?"

"Two of 'em seemed to be hurt; the well ones have been gone some time."

"But what about the other two?"

"They seemed to be uneasy like; but they was able to walk; didn't you meet one of 'em? He hasn't been out of the house long. He said he would be back in a few minutes."

"Which way did the two go?" demanded Emerson.

"I couldn't tell you that, for I didn't watch 'em; you can see they're not here now."

"Come, Jim; they can't be far off," and the couple, without bidding their informants good-night, hurried away.

A well-worn path led from the front of the humble home to the highway, some fifty yards distant. The

two men walked rapidly along this, hopeful of coming upon those for whom they were looking within the next few minutes.

Catesby was in front, and had just reached the road, when he caught sight of one of the criminals. He was limping in front of them with the aid of a cane, and evidently did not hear their approach.

"Sh!" whispered the leader, turning his head; "the other can't be far off. Be careful to make no noise."

They stole rapidly forward on tiptoe, and were within a dozen feet of Mugg Voorhes, when his keen ears told him his danger. He turned like a flash, and looked over his shoulder.

"Halt!" commanded Catesby, leveling his Winchester; "we want you."

The nerve of the criminal did not desert him in that trying moment. He saw that the couple "had the drop on him," as the expression goes. The first hostile demonstration on his part would have been fatal. He laughed loudly, as if it was the rarest joke of the season.

"Why, friends, what is the meaning of this? Are you highwaymen, that you stop an honest farmer in this fashion?"

"Honest farmer! You're the man we're looking for; and there's several more of you chaps round here."

"Well, if I can be of any service to you, command me."

"What are you doing with that cane?" asked Catesby, who began to feel a half suspicion that a mistake might have been made after all.

"Why, I'm walking the best I know how with it. When a man suffers with the rheumatism, as I have for years, he's mighty glad to use a cane. I was telling my wife that before long I'd have to take to a crutch."

"Where do you live?"

Voorhes pointed down the road in the gloom, and made answer with every appearance of honesty:—

"Me and my wife, Sallie Higgens (and she's a good wife too) have lived in the little red house at the foot of the hill for nigh onto twenty years. But are you looking for a couple of strangers?" he asked, peering innocently into the faces of the couple, who stood within arm's length of him.

"We're looking for four or five; but there's two of 'em that were winged in trying to hold up a railway train. They can't be far off; and we rather think you're one of 'em."

And again the simple-looking man laughed heartily.

"That's good; I must tell Sally."

Mugg Voorhes was dressed in ordinary costume.

The rifle which he had used in the attempt to rob the train he had flung away with his mask, knowing it would be fatal to any scheme he might form, if the two were found upon him. He had his revolver concealed, but he looked very much like a plain countryman. The doubt in Catesby's mind increased.

Emerson had less misgiving as to the man's real character. He had little to say, but studied the man closely by the slight aid of the starlight. He had not yet decided what to do.

"Have you been down to Mr. Halloran's?" asked the lame man.

"Who's Halloran?"

"It's the name of an old couple, just back of you."

"We have come from there this minute."

"When I was walking along the road, I met a man with a cane the same as myself. He stopped and ask the shortest way to Grubb City. He must have been one of the party you are looking for."

"What else did he say?" asked Catesby.

"He said he left a friend at Mr. Halloran's that had fallen off the cars and was hurt too bad to walk."

"That reminds me," exclaimed Catesby; "the old folks didn't really say that both the men had left. I believe the other fellow is there; let's go back after him, Jim."

"I'm pretty sure you'll find one of 'em there; if I

can be of any help to you, I'll be glad, friends; though I've been out so long, my wife must be worrying about me."

It was hard work for Mugg Voorhes to repress his chuckling pleasure over the prospect of the success of the scheme he had formed for the betrayal of a companion. His course was the baser because there was no real need of his treachery; but he was a miscreant who would betray anyone through innate meanness itself.

In this case, however, he reckoned without his host. If Catesby had been so ready to fall into the trap set for him, his companion was not. Standing a single pace to the rear, he continued studying the sinister countenance as faintly revealed in the gloom.

"There's no need of both of us going," he replied; "you can attend to one wounded man without help. I'm not through with this customer."

"All right," replied Catesby, seeing the prudence of his friend; "it won't take me long to settle this business."

He turned and hurried back over the road, quickly darting into the path that led to the house where he had called but a brief while before.

Emerson hardly glanced at him, but gave his attention to the man whom he confronted.

It need not be said that matters were not in the

most agreeable shape to Mugg Voorhes. He expected the other man to come back shortly with McCutcheon, who, the moment he saw he had been betrayed, would be certain to give all the facts.

Something must be done, and that right speedily.

"Won't you walk home with me?" asked the outlaw in his most gracious manner; "poor Sally will be distressed to death over my absence."

As he spoke, he dropped his hand in an apparently aimless manner down his side toward his hip. His revolver was resting there, and he meant to whip it out and shoot his troublesome companion. Then he could slip among the trees, and, despite his lameness, escape from the other.

But Emerson was on the alert. He read the meaning of the stealthy movement. He was naturally quick of action himself. With a single panther-like bound he pinioned the arms of Mr. Mugg Voorhes, and with similar bewildering quickness slipped a pair of hand-cuffs upon him. No professional detective could have managed the trick with more deftness.

"There! Sally will have to wait a little longer for your return," said Emerson, stepping back, and grimly confronting him; "you may have fooled Catesby, but I'm not the bird to be caught with such chaff."

Meanwhile, Catesby was improving his opportunity. It took but a few minutes to retrace his steps to the

humble home, where he was confident of finding one of the criminals.

As before, there was some hesitancy after his knock ere he was bidden to enter. But it was only momentary, and he quickly stepped inside.

"I'm after that other fellow," he brusquely explained; "where is he?"

It may be said that his bluffing manner overwhelmed the couple. They could not tell an untruth, and the question was too direct to be parried by any subterfuge which might placate their consciences.

The husband took it upon himself to reply. Pointing to the closed door leading to the adjoining room, he said, —

"He is in there; he was there when you called before; he came out after you left, and hid himself agin when you come back; you'll find him there."

"All right," responded Catesby, striding through the door; "that makes one of the birds that is caged."

CHAPTER XXIV.

TEMPTING FATE.

CATESBY passed from the sitting-room of the Hallorans into the adjoining apartment, which was the "spare" one of the house. He flung the door wide open, so as to admit the light behind him.

It was sufficient to illuminate the interior of the room, and to reveal an object half the size of a man. His sweeping glance, however, failed to show him the crouching criminal that had been wounded in his attempt to rob the railway train.

But the survey revealed something else: it was an open window on his right, the lower sash raised half way to the top; it told its story with mute eloquence.

He wheeled to go back to the sitting-room, and bumped against Mr. Halloran and his wife, who were peering over his shoulder.

"Gosh! he's gone!" exclaimed the old gentleman.

"I should say he was! How long ago was he here?"

"Only a few minutes; he heard you step upon the porch, and darted into the spare room. He must be here; fetch the lamp, Mirandy."

His wife stepped hastily to the table behind her and brought the light, which she held above her head, while she craned her neck and peered around the apartment. Then, as if still in doubt, she entered and began again looking behind chairs, under the sofa, and in the corners where a cat could not have hidden itself.

The interval was so brief between the departure of McCutcheon and the entrance of Catesby that, had the latter vaulted instantly through the window, he must have come upon his man. Recalling his forgetfulness, he dashed to the opening and peered out.

But the few seconds lost were fatal to any hopes in that direction. The fugitive had made his escape by one of the rear windows, which was so close to the wood that he had already reached the impenetrable shadows, into which no animal, unless a bloodhound, could trace him.

Catesby heaved a sigh.

"He's gone; that's certain. Was he hurt bad?"

"About the same as the other."

"What sort of looking man is the other?"

Mr. Halloran gave a fair description of him. He had hardly finished when Catesby, in more excitement than before, exclaimed, —

"That's him! We've got him sure, unless Jim

has been fooled worse than I was; and I'm afraid he has."

Without any explanation he was out of the door like a shot, and running down the narrow path to the highway. He was in mortal dread lest the criminal had played a trick upon his comrade; but his fears on that point were relieved the next moment, when he observed the outlines of the couple.

"Hold him fast, Jim!" he shouted; "that's one of 'em! Don't let him go! Ah, that's good!" he added, observing the helpless prisoner.

"Where's your man?" coolly asked Emerson, as his panting friend halted beside him.

"Confound it, he's gone! He slipped out of the window, just as I was going in the door. This is the other fellow."

"I knew it all the time, and put the nippers on him."

"Good again! I couldn't have done better myself."

Mugg Voorhes was a man who knew when to accept the inevitable. He saw the "jig was up," and remarked grimly,—

"You've got me dead to rights, boys. You were too sharp for me; but I guess we can fix it between us. What is it worth?"

But he quickly learned that he had misjudged the

men with whom he had to deal. They may not have been specially brilliant, but they were honest. They met his approaches with such scorn that he speedly gave over his efforts to corrupt them. He was inextricably caught, and fell into glum silence, refusing to answer any questions, and accepting his fate with the stoicism of an American Indian.

The nearest station was Grubb City, two miles off; and it was decided to make for that point. It must have cost Mugg Voorhes considerable pain to walk alongside his captors, who moved slowly to accommodate their pace to his; but if so he was too proud to let it be seen. No murmur escaped him, and he declined all help in climbing the railway embankment to the ties, where the walking was more secure.

Jack Midwood, having put his house in order, lit a cigar, and was pacing slowly back and forth on the platform awaiting the train which was nearly due from Barmore to Wareton.

"Hello!" he muttered, as he saw three figures in the gloom slowly ascend the steps at the farther end of the station. "If those fellows are not deadheads, it means a boom in business" —

The next moment he recognized them as they came within the circle of light thrown out by the lamp over the station door. The two men whom he

knew to be members of the sheriff's posse had between them Mugg Voorhes, wearing handcuffs. Midwood grasped the situation.

"I have seen your guest before," he remarked, coming forward. "Step inside with him."

"How soon will there be a train for Wareton?"

"Really, there shouldn't be any, but that little affair this evening has played the mischief with the schedule, and knocked everything endways; but I have word that one will be along in ten minutes, unless," he added with a grin, "it is held up by some of this gentleman's friends."

"Little fear of that," remarked Emerson, as the whole party passed within the station and seated themselves. "You winged one of them so badly that he has gone out of the business altogether, and there's another one nipped besides this fellow. Three others are in the woods somewhere, but they're pretty sure to be gathered in before to-morrow night."

"Don't be too certain of that," replied Midwood, glancing sideways at the prisoner. "You wouldn't have caught this bird so easily if he hadn't been hurt."

"You can bet on that!" muttered Mugg Voorhes, with a flash of his keen eyes, breaking silence for the first time.

"Which doesn't affect the conclusion of the mat-

ter, so far as you are concerned," added the telegraph operator. "If I'm not mistaken, I had a little to do with the winding up of this business."

"That's the fellow who shot your man, just as he was drawing a bead on the engineer."

This was the first knowledge Mugg Voorhes had of the fact, and he looked with what may be called wondering hate at the diminutive youth who had fired the only fatal shot that was discharged during the affray.

But Jack Midwood was by no means proud of the exploit. He regretted, indeed, the awful necessity that compelled him to decide between doing as he did or see a worthy man slain. No one could condemn him for his quick decision, which sacrificed a worthless life for a valuable one; but, all the same, he was distressed at the remembrance.

His wish to prevent this miscreant from suspecting he had any fear of the consequences of the act, led him to say, —

"It would be a gain to the community if every one of the half dozen had been shot down. This fellow sent a telegram through the office here, which was suspicious. I saw him some time ago in the penitentiary when making it a visit, so I knew what he was. He hasn't enough brains to invent a decent cipher, so I read it with little trouble."

At this moment Mugg Voorhes shifted his leg as if to secure an easier position for it. As he did so, a twitch of the face told of the pain he suffered. Jack Midwood's feelings changed on the instant.

"It is cruel to triumph over a suffering enemy; I beg your pardon, for what I said. I am pretty handy with dressing wounds. Will you let me examine your limb to see whether I can do anything for you?"

And he knelt in front of the evil man, with the tenderness of a woman, anxious to relieve, so far as possible, his suffering.

But his sympathy was wasted.

"If I want your sympathy, I'll ask for it; I'm sorry I didn't shoot you when I had the chance."

The youth looked reproachfully at him, but repressed the hot reply that struggled to his lips. He could afford to feel charity for one in his condition.

"Emerson, may I speak to you?" he asked. Midwood knew not only the names of the men, but was aware which was the brighter of the two. The fact that it would not be prudent to leave the prisoner unguarded, was excuse for not asking Catesby to join in the conversation.

Midwood and Emerson stepped out on the platform, where they were beyond hearing of others.

"Now, Mr. Emerson, if you please, let me know how you were lucky enough to catch him?"

The man told the story as it is known to the reader. When Midwood heard of the prisoner's baseness in betraying his wounded comrade, he experienced two emotions, each to a powerful degree. The first was of unutterable contempt for a person who would thus betray a suffering companion, even though that companion was an evil-doer like himself. The second feeling was of sympathy for the one thus betrayed. He recalled that the wounded one had been deserted just before by his stronger comrades, and then the one who should have stood by him to the end sought to deliver him to the hands of justice.

"Well, you have been lucky thus far; I don't know which of the gang the other wounded one is, though it was I who shot him; but I can tell you that I'm pretty certain you have the leader there. At any rate, he is one of the foremost."

"I'm mighty glad to know that; it will make our glory all the greater."

Midwood could not help replying in his quiet way,—

"Remember that you and Catesby are two strong, well men, each with a Winchester and pistol. This fellow had only his revolver. Then, too, he was wounded; so if I were in your place, Emerson, I wouldn't crave too much glory for the exploit. What

I want to say is this: I think it likely one or more of the missing scamps will try to board the train that will be here in a few minutes."

"They wouldn't dare do that!" exclaimed the other in surprise.

"You don't understand me. Those fellows are mighty sharp, and up to every trick you can think of, and a good many you can't think of. It may strike some of them that if they enter the train at one of the stations unnoticed they will not be suspected. Keep your eyes open for something of the kind between here and Varick. Of course, nothing can take place farther away than that. Helloa! there's the train!"

A locomotive whistle pierced the stillness, and the next moment the headlight gleamed among the trees as it swept around the curve to the eastward of Grubb City. It was heard by Catesby, who came out on the platform, with the prisoner at his side.

The train was signaled to stop, and drew up beside the platform, though, as Midwood laughingly remarked, he had not succeeded in selling a ticket since assuming his new situation.

The belief which Mugg Voorhes expressed that the news of the attempted train robbery had already been telegraphed to different points was well founded, for almost the first remark of the conductor was an

inquiry as to the particulars. In the brief halt which he made, he added much to his stock of knowledge about the stirring affair.

Midwood kept modestly in the background, and nothing was learned of the creditable part he took in the affair until it was too late to question him. He dropped a hint to the conductor about keeping his eye open for suspicious passengers; for the young man could not help believing that an attempt would be made by one or more of the gang to pass "through the lines" by some such bold artifice.

As the train steamed away from the station, Midwood strove with the utmost power of his keen vision to penetrate the gloom which enveloped it. At the moment the rear end of the last car was vanishing in the darkness, he saw a man leap forward from the side of the track, seize the guard-rail, and by a strong effort swing himself aboard.

"That's one of them," was his conclusion; "and unless they are pretty sharp on the train he'll outwit them yet."

Passing behind the railing he sat down to his key to send a dispatch to Varick, apprising the conductor of what had taken place; but he changed his mind and did not do so, for the good reason that the break in the wire had not been repaired, and no message could be sent westward except by

a roundabout course and through so many offices that the delay was likely to render it useless.

"The news of the flurry has been sent by the other course, though I don't see how it got out. But I have given them enough hints," he reflected; "and the stranger will be spotted, unless Catesby, Emerson, and the conductor are a great deal more stupid than I think. I would like to take a hand in the hunt for the missing rogues to-morrow if I can gain the chance. Meantime, as my work is done for the night, I'll sleep."

The skill which most railway conductors acquire in recognizing additions to passengers is familiar to every one. They pass through a well-filled car, and, by glancing to the right and left as they do so, instantly detect a face which was not present when they made their tour some time before.

Conductor Davis had neither more nor less expertness than the average railway official in this respect, but he was unusually alert when he began his circuit shortly after his train steamed past Grubb City.

He reached the last car, and opened the rear door, as was his custom, to assure himself that no one was stealing a ride. The brakeman, who should have been at that post, was at the front. Catesby and Emerson were in the smoker with their prisoner. Having scrutinized every place where a person

might be, the conductor faced about, and began his return.

"Midwood is a bright fellow, but he wasn't very sharp when he suspected any one of those men would dare board this train. They are too shrewd for anything like that. They haven't had time to get to Varick since the hold-up, so we're not to have any of them in addition to that ugly-looking fellow in the smoker."

In passing through the last car but one, conductor Davis was struck with a weak doubt respecting one person. He was sitting near the middle of the car by himself, with his head leaning against the half-open window, though the night was quite cool, his mouth open, and his eyes closed as if asleep.

"I don't know whether he was here before or not, but he acts like one who has come through from Barmore."

Leaning over the shoulder of a man sitting a short distance behind the sleeper, the conductor placed his mouth close to his ear, and asked, —

"Do you recollect whether that gentleman was on the train before we reached Grubb City?"

But the passenger gruffly told him it was his rule to mind his own business, and he preferred to let other folks do the same. He didn't know anything about the man; and if he did, he wouldn't take the trouble to tell any railway conductor.

Conductor Davis touched the stranger on the shoulder. He had to stir him quite sharply before he opened his eyes and looked confusedly around him.

"Did I take your ticket, sir?"

"Of course you did," growled the other; "don't you remember that I asked you why you didn't wait till we got beyond Varick, and you said that was the rule, but it made no difference either way?"

The conductor could not recall the circumstances, and he passed on with an apology for disturbing the passenger.

But for the hint of Jack Midwood he would have thought no more about it. But he was not satisfied. He approached Catesby and Emerson, and explained his dilemma. They proposed that their prisoner should be taken back to settle the question, judging from his course regarding his wounded companion, that he would have no objection to a second betrayal. He said he was willing, and was conducted to the rear car.

The moment the door was opened, he looked keenly at the pretended sleeper, and said with a half laugh, —

"Yes; that's one of us. He's Bill Ringgold, our leader."

Whether he was the leader or not, it was unmistakably the man Ringgold who had thus tempted fate and fallen.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SUDDEN IMPULSE.

WHEN George Washington Jenkins, and P. Cato Hulfish reached the highway with their half dozen horses, each mounted one of the best, and halted for a few minutes consultation.

"Do yo' know what I tinks?" asked Cato.

"How should I know what yo' tinks?"

"Dese animals b'longs to a party ob chicken t'ieves dat has come down hyah from New York to rob de roosts ob de folks in dis neighborhood."

"Pshaw! wonder if dat can be how it am; do yo' know what I tinks, Cato?"

"How should I know what yo' tinks?" was the brilliant retort of the older of the couple.

"We'd better diwide our fo'ces."

"What yo' driving at, Wash?"

"Yo' take de hoss dat yo' am a-straddle ob, and de four oders, and ride like sin for Ashmont; I'll do de same for Varick."

"Wharfur we do dat?" inquired the puzzled Cato.

"If de owners — dat am de pussons dat hab lost dese animals — should happen to find us togedder,

dey'll got 'em all away from us. De most likely places for dem folks am toward Varick; if dey cotches me, dey'll got only one ob 'em, and you'll hab de oder five; den when I jines yo' we can diwide de property."

"How we's gwine to diwide five hosses, I should like to know; cut one ob 'em in two, eh?"

"We won't hab any trouble 'bout dat; we'll toss up for de odd hoss."

Rather curiously, perhaps, the proposition of Jenkins struck his companion favorably. He believed, as had been said, that there was much less danger of molestation in the direction of Ashmont. That commended the plan to Hulfish very strongly. Then Miss Priscilla Smith at last accounts was at Ashmont. He chuckled inwardly at the thought of how his rival was cheating himself by giving him the privilege of making the sensation they had counted upon, without Jenkins being present to divide the honors. He would delay his arrival at Ashmont until toward morning, and then ride into the little town alone. The impression made upon Miss Smith would be irresistible. He forgot his recent pledge to Jenkins, and with sad ingratitude decided to make the best of the chance offered him.

As for Jenkins, it must be confessed that he, too, was inspired by an equally unworthy motive. His real belief was that all the danger which threatened

them for their high-handed course in taking possession of the animals would come from the direction of Ashmont. By turning his companion, therefore, toward that point, he would, as he thought, shift the whole risk upon his shoulders. It was not far to Varick; and he was confident of arriving there without any trouble on the road. It is fair to believe that he held no suspicion of the treachery meditated by his friend; though had he known it, it may be doubted whether he would have changed his line of action.

Concealing his pleasure over the proposition, Hulfish agreed to it. At the cross roads, a half mile ahead, therefore, they halted again to decide a few unimportant particulars. Then, seated in the saddle of one of the best horses, with four stringing along behind (as such animals will follow their leader), Hulfish moved off at a moderate pace to the eastward, while Jenkins took the opposite course.

The latter sat motionless in the saddle of the black mare to which the wounded McCutcheon had referred, and which was the fleetest of the lot, and watched the odd procession until it disappeared in the gloom. Then he chuckled.

"De big fool don't know de trick dat I's playing on to him. He'll neber cotch sight ob Ashmont wid dem hosses. De owners will snap him up before he gets widin a tousand miles ob de place."

Jenkins to a certain extent was right. Cato Hulfish was riding over the highway, with the horses on a walk, often glancing back to make sure they were in line, while he was meditating upon the irresistible impression he was sure to make on Miss Smith, when the crisis came.

Had the fellow paid more attention to the road in front, he might have parried the blow which descended like a thunderbolt from the clear sky; but he was so familiar with the course that he did not deem any precaution necessary. At the moment he arrived opposite a group of trees, a stranger stepped into view, and, leveling a Winchester rifle at him, said in a gruff voice, —

"Climb down off there quicker'n lightning!"

No command was ever obeyed more promptly. In fact, it looked as if the startled Cato actually fell out of the saddle, so quickly did he drop to the ground, his teeth chattering with terror.

"It wasn't me, boss, dat took de hosses," he said, hardly able to articulate the words in his extremity of affright. "It was dat low-down Wash Jenkins; and he made me start 'em home; dat was what I was gwine to do, so as to sabe 'em for de owner, and den" —

"Shut up!" broke in the man, lowering his gun and coming forward; "I don't want to hear any-

thing from you. Go home! You're lucky that I don't blow the top of your head off; but I'll only help you a little."

With which he delivered such a tremendous kick to Cato Hulfish that he was fairly lifted off his feet. As he descended, his face was turned in the direction of Ashmont. He understood that he had been ordered to travel toward that point of the compass, and he proceeded to do so with all the energy at his command. He ran as never before, until, when he glanced behind him, he saw nothing of the terrible being that had given him his great impulse in the direction of the little country town.

This being, who was one of the fugitive train-robbers, wasted no time on him. He swung himself into the saddle, wheeled the other way, and struck off on a swift gallop. He took no notice of the other four horses. They were valuable, and would prove a prize to whomsoever secured them; but the fellow had mounted the best one, and was thinking only of his own safety: that was worth more than all the blooded steeds in the State.

It may as well be said in this place that the horses, left to themselves, wandered along the highway, until they were picked up one by one, by the farmers in the vicinity, and kept until the owners should call for them, which is equivalent to saying

they became the property of the finders. The criminal who thus secured the means of flight, made so good use of it, that he escaped altogether, despite the watch maintained for him by the officers of the law. Once beyond the confines of the State, it was impossible to trace him. Thus the rogue was more fortunate than any of his companions.

Meanwhile, Jenkins was jogging along at an easy pace to the westward — that is, toward Varick, which was a moderately sized town, where he and Hulfish had long made their home. Convinced that all danger was behind him, he was in no hurry to reach the end of his journey, only a few miles distant.

It was natural that he should be at a loss to explain the strange discovery of the group of valuable horses in the woods; or rather, the explanation of their presence there was a mystery beyond his comprehension. He made several attempts to solve it, and then gave it up. It was enough for him to know he had secured the very best horse in the lot, and that, so far as he could judge, it would remain his property always.

"Cato Hulfish is sure to be scooped in by some ob de folks as am interested in de hosses, and den he'll hab to walk. I'll own de bestest animal in de kentry, and when I make him prance and stand on his hind legs and paw de air wid his forefeet,

when he sees Miss Prisciller Smith coming, why, Cato won't be nowhar."

Alas! that his meditations should take the same crooked course so far as they referred to his rival in love. Human nature is much the same in all races and among all conditions of men.

Jenkins was roused from his pleasant meditations by an incident almost as startling as that which upset his friend, Cato Hulfish. A slight snuff and the pricking of her ears by the black mare turned the rider's attention to the front, where he saw a man approaching, gun in hand.

Jenkins checked his horse, uncertain what to do; but when the person hailed him the horseman was relieved beyond expression to recognize him as a resident of Wareton, for whom he had done work.

"Are you looking for the robbers, too, Wash?" asked the gentleman, who was a member of the sheriff's posse, and who, like the rest, carried a loaded Winchester.

"Wharfur what does yo' mean, Marse Davenport? What yo' saying 'bout robbers? I dunno nuffin' 'bout sich folks."

"Haven't you heard that they stopped one of the railway trains? There was a sharp fight; one of them was killed, and the rest beaten off; they are somewhere in the neighborhood;" and Mr. Davenport

looked around as if he expected to catch sight of the whole party. "So you haven't seen anything of them, Wash?"

"Gracious, no! I don't want to see nuffin of dem; I hain't lost no robbers."

"If you can capture two or three of them you are pretty sure of a good reward."

"I ain't working for no reward, Marse Davenport."

"Who's horse is that, Wash?" broke in the man, stepping forward and inspecting the mare with much interest; "she's a splendid animal."

"She's mine," was the proud reply.

"Yours? Where did you get her?"

Pinned down to facts, Jenkins gave the particulars of how the animals came into the possession of himself and Cato Hulfish.

"It was a good thing that you found them," said Davenport, after hearing the story; "no doubt they belonged to those train-robbers, who meant to ride away on them. That makes the chance of our catching the whole gang better than before. Well, I must be off, for we have no time to throw away."

Left to himself again Jenkins hardly knew the best course to take. He was now in a very different frame of mind. The news he had just heard convinced him that he had made a woeful mistake in sending Hulfish

toward Ashmont, under the belief that he himself had taken the much safer direction to the westward.

He soon decided that the whole peril lay between him and Varick, to which he had now approached comparatively close. If he kept on, he would ride right among the terrible robbers, who would show him no mercy. It would never do to enter his native town as he had intended. Some other course must be followed.

It was not strange that the simple-minded fellow adopted the line of action that was almost certain to bring about the very catastrophe which he was seeking to escape. His theory was that the robbers were seeking to make their way to Varick, and the only method of avoiding them was by delaying his return to the same place until they had arrived. Then, when he rode into the town, they would not dare molest him.

It was a most remarkable theory to act upon, and it is safe to say it could have been formulated by no one besides George Washington Jenkins. But it was his, and he followed it.

Knowing the country so well, he turned to the right, that is, toward Grubb City, at the next crossing of the highways, and kept it up for a couple of hours. By that time it was well toward midnight. Then he changed his course again, and headed for Varick; but

the gait of his mettled mare was a walk, and he was by no means free from misgiving.

The delay in going home resulted in two important issues. One of the men that were hunting for the criminals carried the news of the occurrence into the town, where, as a matter of course, it produced a sensation, and set every one on the *qui vive.* It may be said that hardly an adult went to sleep in Varick that night. Some of the timid ones were sure of a visit from the dreadful beings, and there was a general loading up of weapons to receive them.

The other issue of Jenkins's delay was that the single criminal who was still wandering through the country dodging the officers of the law, and striving to reach a safe point, got between him and Varick, and had indeed approached the edge of the little country town before he discovered his peril. Then he turned to hasten off, and was thus engaged, when he suddenly came face to face with Jenkins, as he turned a corner in the highway with his horse still on a walk.

The hour was now so late, that the moon, which was nearly full, was shining from the unclouded sky. The criminal, like many of his companions, had cast aside his Winchester rifle, so as not to attract attention to himself. He retained, of course, his smaller weapon. Being much quicker witted than

the African, he recognized the black mare the instant his eyes fell upon her. He could not know, of course, the means by which she had come into the possession of the negro, but he decided to obtain possession of her without delay. Her value was beyond estimate to him as the circumstances stood.

"That's my horse!" he called, striding angrily forward, pistol in hand. "Get out of the saddle as quick as you know how, or I'll tumble you out."

Jenkins obeyed, offering no explanation, well aware that none could be offered. He swung one leg over the haunches of the mare, and lowered himself to the ground. Then he took her by the bridle, and said, as if addressing his employer: —

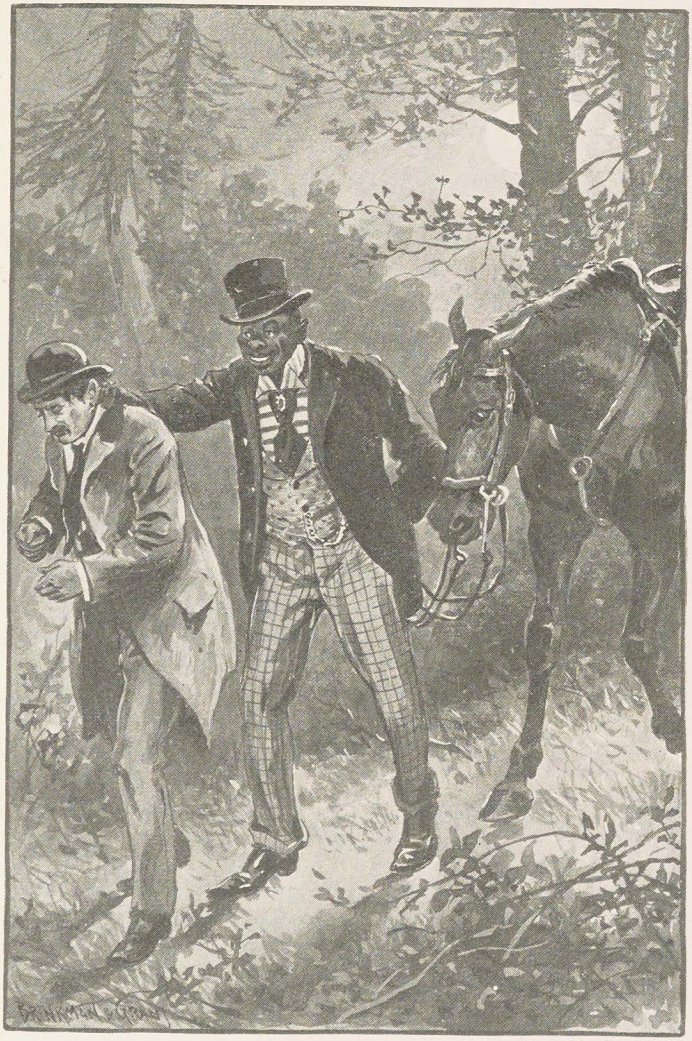
"I'll hold her, boss, while you get in de saddle."

"I don't need your help, but all right."

The rogue placed one foot in the stirrup, and started to mount in the regulation way, when an occurrence took place which is easy to describe but difficult to explain.

The words and manner of Jenkins disarmed the other of all fear he might have felt of the African, who promptly obeyed the first summons. He shoved his pistol back in his pocket, and, as I have said, was in the act of mounting, when a strange incident occurred.

Every person knows what it is to be subject to a



"Young man, I sees yo', and I knows yo'!"

sudden and uncontrollable impulse. It is not credible that Jenkins had a thought of anything but the most implicit obedience to the wishes of the fellow, until he saw him put away his weapon and begin to climb into the saddle. Then he yielded to an impulse which, if resisted, probably would not have lasted more than a few seconds.

Letting go of the bridle, he threw his beam-like arms about the white man so as to hold him immovable, and flung him on his back to the ground, as he might have tossed an infant from him. He had more than double the strength of the criminal, and mastered him with little effort.

His victim struggled furiously, swore frightfully, and strove madly to draw his pistol; but so mighty was the power of Jenkins, that he restrained him with one hand, while he took possession of the weapon with the other. Then he yanked him to his feet as if he were a bundle of rags.

"Young man, I sees yo', and I knows yo'! Yo's one ob dem obsiliferous willains dat stopped de railway train to see if dar warn't no chickens on board dat yo' mought stole! I knows it! Yo' needn't deny it! Yo's got to go wid me! Trabel straight ahead, and do yo' hear me? No nonsense!"

Jenkins slipped his left arm through the bridle, slid the revolver into his own pocket, and with the

right hand gripping the collar of the prisoner's coat, as if every finger was made of finely tempered steel, he started toward Varick. Nor did he release his grip until he delivered the captive to the authorities of the town.

One of the fugitive criminals remains to be accounted for, and the telling of that brings in for the last time our old friend Jack Midwood.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RUN DOWN.

No one will deny that the part taken by Jack Midwood in defeating the designs of the evil men that had attempted to rob the railway train was praiseworthy in every respect; and yet, as I have shown, the memory of the affair was anything but pleasant to him. While he had done no more than his duty, yet a duty may be distressful to the last degree. He would always regret the necessity that made him, when firing his pistol over the embankment, aim it with the unerring certainty which he knew when he pressed the trigger meant the death of the miscreant at whom it was leveled. But he was troubled by another feeling. He learned on the morning after the occurrence that all the criminals had been captured with the exception of two, and there was good reason to believe that both of them would be secured. It has already been said that he who captured the horse which Cato Hulfish was riding got away scot free, so no more need be stated in reference to him. But the wounded man who eluded Catesby by so narrow a chance must be some-

where in the neighborhood, and it looked impossible for him to get away. More than likely, he was so disabled by his hurt that he would be forced to give himself up, sooner or later, to some one hunting for him.

It was his reflections concerning this individual that troubled Jack Midwood. The fact that the man was injured was sufficient to awaken the sympathy of any one; but his desertion by his comrades was followed by a deliberate attempt on the part of Mugg Voorhes to betray him. Midwood naturally determined to try to befriend him. He had no means of knowing which one of the gang it was he shot, for the members were disguised at the time of the attack; and, as will be remembered, Jack had seen only three of them when he visited the cabin known as the "Haunted House."

You will recall that while Midwood lay in the upper part of the structure, expecting discovery every moment, the face of a person appeared through the opening, and he noticed its youthful appearance. He suspected this was the individual who was in dire distress, but had no means of knowing it.

One of the company of law-breakers was dead, three were under lock and key, and two remained at large. The inquest, the trial, and all of the law's varied turnings were yet to come, and in these Midwood

must be an important witness. The inquest was held at Grubb City the day after the death, so he was able to attend without prejudice to his duties as agent at the station. He was detained but a brief while; and when through, and when the body was turned over to the undertaker who lived at Varick, in the same county, the members of the jury having separated to their homes, Midwood found he had still a couple of hours at command before any need was likely to arise for his presence at the office.

He had learned that the house of Mr. Halloran, from which the wounded man escaped, was some two miles distant. He could readily go there and return in the time named; but he hesitated, because he saw nothing to be gained by the act. The man was not there, nor was he likely to return after such a close call. But it was probable he was in the neighborhood; and knowing that others believed the same, and were assiduously hunting, the youth wondered that the fugitive had not been run down before this.

When he knew he was alone, Midwood struck into the woods, taking a course which, if persevered in, would lead him to the house where the criminals procured their meal the evening before. He was on the alert, watchful, listening, and as observant as an Apache scout. To this fact was due his detection of two searchers, before he had gone an eighth of a mile.

They were not members of the sheriff's posse, but a couple of countrymen, their lunch with them, who were tempted by the hope of a big reward to try to capture the wounded man. They were sitting on a fallen tree, evidently wearied with their long tramp, and seemed to be discussing their prospects of success.

Midwood watched them a few minutes, and then, by a little care, passed around and beyond their position without their suspecting his nearness. He tried to form some reasonable theory by which to locate the fugitive; but one of the easiest things in the world is to originate a "theory," which as a theory may be perfect, while, in fact, it has not a shadow of truth in its composition.

"After all, if I find him before he dies," concluded Midwood, walking thoughtfully among the trees, where the undergrowth was plentiful, "it will be due to chance, or rather Providence. The only sensible conclusion that can throw any possible light on his whereabouts is that the wound he has received will cause fever; he will run every risk to quench his thirst; not daring to approach any house, he will keep near some water that he can drink. Here is a brook, and it seems fair, therefore, that he is not far off, though whether up or down stream remains to be learned."

He turned to the right, which was up stream, and in the direction of the railway, a half mile or so distant. Acting upon the theory he had formed, he scanned the sides of the brook, which was never more than a yard in width. Sooner than he expected came a significant discovery.

Near the left of the stream, that is, on the side toward the Halloran home, were signs which showed that some one had knelt down and drank. Closer examination disclosed that this had been done several times, as if the person had gone away and returned more than once. The damp earth revealed the indentations, but when they reached the leaves and hard ground he was unable to trace them. He now began a careful study of his surroundings, with a view of forming another theory upon which to base his action.

"The undergrowth off yonder is denser than anywhere else. When daylight came and the man was able to see this, he has turned it to account. I will first take a look there."

It was but a brief walk to the section he had in mind. He parted the bushes which were so thick that he had to pick his way with considerable care. He was thus engaged when the crack of a pistol broke the stillness, and a bullet whizzed by his cheek.

Midwood had seen the point whence the shot came,

and he darted like a cat behind the nearest tree. He had his own weapon at command, but did not draw it.

Peeping cautiously out, he saw the man whom he had in mind — him of the youthful countenance — sitting on the ground with his back against the trunk of a tree, with his smoking pistol in hand, and glaring fiercely at him, and waiting for a second chance to fire.

Midwood recognized the face, but it was ghastly pale, made more so by contrast with the dark masses of hair which clustered about the forehead; for in the hurry of flight he had lost his hat. He suggested more than anything else a wild beast run down by the hounds, and turning at bay.

McCutcheon had seen his discoverer dart behind the shelter, but it was done so quickly that he could not aim a second time. He kept his fierce eyes fixed on the point, eagerly watching for the opportunity.

"Put away your pistol!" called Midwood; "I won't hurt you."

"Show yourself like a man!" returned McCutcheon; "come out here, and we'll settle this business in five minutes."

"I can settle it sooner than that; you are at my mercy."

"Bah! talk is cheap."

"You are sitting with your back against that oak. Now I will put a ball a half inch above your head; next one half inch beside your cheek; then a third that distance on the left; if, after that, you would like me to step out and try a shooting-match, we'll talk it over. Now, sit still, my good fellow. Here goes!"

Three reports rang out in quick succession, and Jack Midwood performed to the letter the exploit he had named. The three bullets were buried in the trunk of the oak, so close to the wounded McCutcheon that had he moved an inch to the right or left, or shifted his position upward, he surely would have been struck.

"I have two more shots left," called Jack; "and I think you'll admit I can wind up matters without any risk to myself."

"You've got me," replied McCutcheon; "but I'll never surrender; I know what that means; you may kill me first."

"But I don't want to kill you; I don't want to hurt you; I want to be your friend; I have no one with me, and if you will trust me, I will trust you."

The man stared as if he suspected he was talking with a lunatic.

"I — I don't understand you."

"You understand this."

As Midwood uttered this sentence, he shoved his pistol in his pocket, stepped from behind the tree, and walked straight toward the open-mouthed criminal seated on the ground.

"You have a good chance to pop me over," remarked Jack, in his good-humored way, "but I don't think you will. Let's shake!"

McCutcheon let the weapon fall from his grasp, and limply extended his hand, speechless with wonder.

"What are you driving at anyway?" he finally found voice to ask.

"I feel sorry for you, and if you will allow me, I will do you a good turn. Let me look at your wound."

McCutcheon was hurt almost similarly to Mugg Voorhes. Midwood's bullet had passed through the fleshy part of the thigh, inflicting an injury, which, while painful, was not necessarily dangerous, provided it received proper attention, which was what it had not received. It was bandaged quite well by the kind Mrs. Halloran, but the bandage, like the man's hat, was knocked off in his hasty flight, and the hurt was in sore need of attention.

"Whew!" muttered Midwood, "it won't do to leave that any longer; are you able to walk?"

"How far?"

"Something like half a mile."

"I might if I had help."

"I'll help you."

"But who are you? Why do you act this way toward me? I can't believe, after what has taken place, you mean me harm."

"I have charge of the station a half mile off; I am alone there, and have fairly comfortable quarters; if you can manage to hobble with my aid, we'll fix you up in shipshape style."

"By gracious! it's worth trying," replied McCutcheon with a smile which pleased his friend; "but I'll be a big burden to you."

"Wait a minute or two, till I get you a cane."

With the aid of his keen jack-knife, Midwood quickly fashioned a rude implement which served well as a cane. Then he helped McCutcheon to his feet, telling him not to be afraid to lean on him. The movement caused the man intense distress at first, and it looked for a time as if it would be impossible for him to make his way to the railroad station; but after a few steps the action became easier, and both were encouraged.

Midwood made no reference to the occurrences of the night before, but did his utmost to cheer the fellow, whom he pitied more than ever. Somehow or

other he formed the belief that he was a young man of education, and socially much superior to those with whom he had been associated. Midwood jested in so bright a way, that the astonished and grateful McCutcheon laughed outright more than once. Then Midwood gave an exhibition of some of his peculiar musical attainments; for, like every sensible physician, he knew the value of hope with a patient. He imitated a bagpipe, a jewsharp, an Æolian harp, the tuning of a violin, and then the playing of the "Arkansas Traveller" jig; the tinkling of a piano, a mandolin, and still other instruments, followed by the whirring of insects, the humming of bumble-bees, and finally by the delicious melody, "Suwanee River," which always captivated Superintendent Starkweather.

"Well, I'm blessed if you don't beat anything I ever knew or heard of!" exclaimed the admiring sufferer. "You are a traveling band, with all sorts of musical instruments. Is there anything you can't do?"

It was Midwood's turn to laugh. What pleased him just then was the fact that the man was walking more easily than at any time since starting; and three-fourths of the distance to the station were already passed.

"Oh, I've picked up a few tricks when I had nothing else to do," replied he deprecatingly; "I might have been in better business."

"I don't know what it could be. We had a fellow in college that we thought beat the world at that sort of thing, but he couldn't begin with you. Why, you could make your fortune by letting the public know your proficiency."

"Let up, please; but if you like that sort of thing, I may give you a little more now and then."

"That's enough to make me half glad that I was winged as I was."

"Come, that won't do; but we are pretty near home, and it's best to keep a lookout for neighbors; we don't care about being bothered by any other people, you know."

McCutcheon understood this delicate hint, and began using his eyes. It was well he did so, for on the very edge of the wood, near the highway which passed the station, both observed the two men whom Midwood had seen some time before. There could be no mistaking their business. What was worse, they were coming directly toward the couple.

"Sit down," whispered Midwood, helping his companion to assume the sitting position where he was out of sight until the couple should approach closer; "I'll attend to them."

He hurried forward, and was speedily descried by the couple, who halted, and made a motion to level their weapons.

"Don't shoot!" called Midwood with a laugh; "my business is selling tickets at the station, that is, whenever any one wants to buy them, which don't often happen. Can I sell you a ticket, gentlemen?"

"Confound it!" exclaimed the foremost countryman; "we thought you was that consarned train-robber; if you had been, we'd let daylight through you, 'cause we understand the reward is good whether he's dead or alive."

"What reward are you talking about? There has been no reward offered for the capturing or shooting of any of those train-robbers."

"Why, we was told that the United States would pay ten thousand dollars for every train-robber catched or blowed sky-high."

Midwood broke into laughter.

"The United States hasn't any more to do with it than you have. You will tramp around here till you catch your death of cold, or till some of those train-robbers catch sight of you."

"'Spose they do catch sight of us — what then?" asked the second countryman, peering around the shoulder of his companion, with a scared look.

"Haven't you ever thought that while you're plodding through the woods, one of those fellows could draw a bead on you without your knowing it, and shoot you both? He had only to wait till you two were in line, and then let fly."

The startled men looked at each other for a moment in awed terror. Then the one in advance said in a husky undertone: —

"Hank, let's go home! They can hunt for their tarnal robbers themselves, being as there ain't no reward that goes with 'em."

"I'm agreed."

And without pausing to say good-by, the couple tramped vigorously off toward their homes. Midwood made sure they were beyond sight, and that no others were near, before he returned to the anxious McCutcheon.

"The coast is clear," he said, "and we couldn't have a better chance than now."

Ten minutes later the wounded criminal reclined on the couch of Jack Midwood, in the upper part of the station, and none but the couple ever dreamed of such a strange thing.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BREAD CAST UPON THE WATERS.

JACK MIDWOOD was clear in his own mind that he was pursuing the right course with the suffering man whom Providence had placed in his care. He might be guilty of a technical violation of law in giving shelter to one that had done wrong, for which he was liable to punishment; but his conscience commended his action, and unless McCutcheon should prove unworthy of his trust, good must result.

The line of conduct decided upon by the youth involved need of extreme care, and was the source of anxiety. In the first place, the neglected wound made him fear he would have to call in the aid of a physician. This would bring another into the secret, who might take a different view of the situation; but, fortunately, a couple of days showed that the risk was not required. McCutcheon was naturally a strong, vigorous man, in the enjoyment of robust health. He was in hopeful spirits, and the amateur doctor knew just what to do. He dressed the wound carefully, gave him the proper food, and, in fact, did all that was possible to do for him. The consequence was he

began to mend, and in a shorter time than either expected was on the high road to recovery.

Long before it was safe to attempt to remove him, Midwood received a message from Superintendent Starkweather that an agent for Grubb City had been engaged, and the youth might return to his much more pleasant post at Wareton. Midwood replied with the request that he be allowed to stay where he was for a week or two longer. His superior was surprised, but could not well refuse the favor, though he intimated he was likely to send for him any day. The truth was the superintendent had formed a stronger liking than ever for the bright young man, and he wanted him near him. His skill and correctness would do much to lighten the burden that must remain on his shoulders as long as his assistant was absent.

Then, too, the search for the wounded criminal was pressed vigorously for days after the attempt upon the train. More than once the parties came into the railway station and discussed the matter with Midwood, while the one for whom they were looking lay a few feet over their heads, and heard every word spoken. Jack did what he could in a prudent way to discourage the hope of finding the missing one, and no doubt the search would have ceased but for the offer of a thousand dollars reward by the express

company for the capture of either of the missing ones.

Although Midwood carefully refrained from referring to the crime in the presence of his patient, he could not check the talk of his visitors. They spoke freely, and complimented him so extravagantly on the part he played, that McCutcheon learned all about it. Midwood would have been glad if his friend could have been kept in ignorance of that deadly shot fired over the embankment, and of the second one, that had wounded him, but it was impossible. They were described too often in glowing terms in his hearing.

If there ever was such a person as a modern Good Samaritan, Jack Midwood proved himself that being. No trained nurse could have treated a patient with more discretion, judgment, and skill. From the food sent him, he fashioned delicate dishes and toothsome luxuries; but, more than all, his never-failing good-humor, wit, and endless ways of entertaining his friend helped the latter along the road to recovery. He sang, gave his wonderful imitations of musical instruments, told amusing stories, and kept McCutcheon in such a bright mood, that he declared over and over again he was glad of the wound that had brought him all this enjoyment, without counting the inestimable good that lay beyond.

At night when there was nothing to fear from vis-

itors, Midwood helped his friend down from the loft; and the two paced the platform arm-in-arm, while they enjoyed the delicious cool, clear air.

"McCutcheon," said Midwood one night when they were thus walking, with his companion showing only a slight limp in his gait, "day after to-morrow I must go back to Wareton."

"How is that?" asked the other, in something like dismay.

"I can't beg off any more. The superintendent has let up twice, but he refuses to do so any longer."

"And what is to become of me?"

"To-morrow night you will take the late train for — home."

The other was silent for a minute, and then said in a low voice, in which Midwood detected a trace of tremulousness: —

"Yes; I think I will go home; though I never would have done so but for you."

"Have you any relatives?"

"I have the best father and mother that ever lived. They are well off; they sent me to Yale, and intended me for some profession. I did take up a fine one, didn't I?"

The question was asked with an indescribable self-disgust.

"Do they know anything about your wayward course?"

"Do they know anything about it? No; if they did, they would have died long ago of broken hearts. They think I am in commercial business in New York; that I have to make long trips now and then for my firm. My mother writes me regularly, and there are several letters, I know, awaiting me at a certain address in the city. In each letter she tells me how she and father pray for me night and morning that I may be preserved from temptation and sin, and how certain they are their prayers are answered, and how they count the days to when they shall clasp me in their arms again" —

The speaker broke down, and with his arms locked with Midwood's, sobbed like a child. Jack was silent. He had been waiting for something like this, and was glad the fountains of the deep were broken up at last.

"Midwood, I'm the worst wretch that breathes! I wonder that God has not struck me with a bolt from heaven for my awful hypocrisy and crimes."

"He does not do that, because He is all-merciful. He means that you shall repent; that you shall come to Him on your knees; and that you shall make all recompense you can by doing good."

"I have repented; when you thought I was asleep, I lay weeping at your side, praying and begging God to give me one single chance to undo some of my wickedness."

"And he has answered your prayer; and that chance now comes to you."

Midwood did not add what he might have added. When McCutcheon was wrestling in spirit with an offended Father, Midwood knew it, for he was not asleep, and, unsuspected by the penitent, Midwood joined his petitions with his.

"And all this is due to you."

McCutcheon would have said more to show his gratitude, but his friend checked him.

"If you love me, say no more in that direction. Heaven uses human instruments to accomplish its designs. I have been an instrument; no other living person need know of your connection with that crime ten days ago, unless," he added with a start, "Mugg Voorhes should betray you."

"Fortunately neither he nor any one of that gang can do that. The only one who really knew me was Gibbs. He and I were classmates in college; it was he who led me off. He was vicious all through, but my guilt in following him was none the less. It is a shameful story" —

"Don't tell it to me," gently interrupted Midwood; "I do not wish to hear it, and you may spare yourself the pain. Let the dead past bury its dead; you are going home to your old father and mother; heaven has heard your prayer, and pardoned

you; you are a new man; if spared, many years of usefulness are before you, in which you can atone for the great wrong you have done. You have money with you, you tell me; though, if you need it, I can spare you some — "

"I have plenty," gently remarked McCutcheon, as they resumed their pacing up and down the platform.

"The belief is now general that you are many miles away, and will never be seen in this neighborhood again. The officers have ceased their search. You can quietly board the train to-morrow night; and, since no one is acquainted with you, there is no danger of recognition. Of course you will let me hear from you now and then."

"Never to my dying day shall my love and gratitude towards you cease," murmured McCutcheon in a broken voice.

On the following night the young man quietly left Grubb City as a passenger on the train for New York; and the next morning Jack Midwood returned to his duties in the office of Superintendent Starkweather at Wareton.

It came about that five years later a party of three were seated and conversing in the library of a certain wealthy gentleman in Wareton. This host was our old friend Superintendent Carman Stark-

weather, who was now president of the W. G. C. & N. railway company, which office he had filled for two years. One of the two guests was Jack Midwood, looking much the same as when we last saw him, except that he was nursing a budding mustache, which, after many months of persuasion, bade fair to assume tangible being. He was now superintendent of the railway company, his superior having made that a condition to his acceptance of the presidency.

The third party was Mr. Frederic Grayson, who held the position of superintendent of telegraph of the line. He had come highly recommended from the West, and for six months had given full satisfaction, so that his place might be considered a fixture. It should be stated, too, that the W. G. C. & N. company had expanded and prospered during the period named. The country through which it ran was developing rapidly; there was talk even of laying a double track; but, more wonderful than all, Grubb City now numbered three families, and the agent at that point averaged a sale of three tickets a week.

"No," said President Starkweather, lighting a cigar, and flipping the twist of paper against the arm of his chair; "I have no patience with this maudlin sympathy with criminals. Let a burly negro murder some defenseless lady, and as soon as he is

caught and locked in jail, his cell is deluged with bouquets of flowers and delicacies from fashionable young and old women, who shed tears over the fear that the brute will have to suffer for his crime. By and by the jurors who have condemned him to his just punishment sign a petition for the commutation of his sentence, and soon for his pardon altogether. Another negro hacks his wife to pieces, owns up, and defiantly awaits his sentence. His lawyer resorts to all sorts of tricks, and cheats the gallows for years, in the belief that he can weary justice into setting him free. I repeat I have no patience with such maudlin sentimentality. Give every man a fair trial, but when he is proven guilty, let him swing!"

And somewhat red in his face, President Starkweather smoked vigorously upon his Partaga. Midwood made no reply; but a peculiar expression passed over his handsome face, as he glanced across the room at Mr. Grayson, who, holding his cigar between his fingers, looked at the host, and gently answered: —

"You do not interpret my views quite correctly. I am as impatient as you with the mock philanthropy that is abroad. But I do say that the legislation of our country errs when it aims merely to punish a criminal without attempting to reform him. When an evil man serves out his sentence,

and is turned loose again, he is the same evil man he was before, with perhaps his nature hardened by his punishment. He only awaits the chance to commit crime again. His penalty has merely made him cautious. Now, suppose that same individual, when set free, was a reformed and different being, with good impulses and the resolution to live a new and better life, would not the world be the gainer?"

"Granting that such a thing is possible, of course society, as well as the man himself, would gain; but I don't believe in such nonsense."

"I am sure you will admit the Bible declaration that there is hope for every person, no matter how vile. In some of the States this faith is assuming practical form, and reformatories are associated with penal institutions. To come down to practical illustrations, I state this proposition: You remember the attempted robbery of one of the trains on our line some five years ago. One of the criminals was killed, and three others captured, and are now serving out their long terms in the penitentiary. Of the remaining two who eluded the officers of justice, one was wounded. Suppose there was something good in this wounded fellow" —

"But there wasn't," interrupted the president with some feeling, "or he wouldn't have been in that business."

"That doesn't prevent our supposing there was," softly returned Mr. Grayson. "Suppose, further, that Mr. Midwood, there, had given shelter to the suffering man, and nursed him back to strength" —

"He would have been a fool, if not worse."

"I cannot agree with you. But admit such a thing had taken place, and the criminal had some gratitude and manliness in his composition; that he saw the frightful wrong he was doing himself, as well as the community; that he returned to his parents, and set about repairing the evil committed; why would not have Mr. Midwood shown true wisdom, to say nothing of his duty to his Maker, in thus seeking to save a fellow-creature from his sins?"

"If I admit the possibility of such an absurd result, of course I cannot deny your proposition; but nothing of the kind could occur" —

"Begging pardon, it did occur."

The interruption came from Jack Midwood, who was leaning back in his easy-chair, with legs crossed, and smiling complacently. In answer to the amazed look of his superior, he added, —

"I took that fellow into my office at Grubb City, helped him back to health and strength, and shook his hand and bade him good-by, when five years ago I saw him on the train the night before I returned to Wareton."

"You did, eh? Well, how have you been paid for your trouble? I'll warrant the ingrate is laughing in his sleeve at your verdancy, and is worse than ever."

"I hardly think so," said Midwood, with the significant smile still playing about his countenance.

"But how can you know? What warrant have you for saying he was not made ten-fold worse by your mistaken philanthropy?"

"You can answer that question as well as I, for the name of the gentleman to whom I showed the kindness is Frederic Grayson, and he sits opposite you this minute puffing away at one of your good cigars."

President Starkweather stared from one to the other, then back again, smoked a moment in silence, and finally rose to his feet. Walking across the room to Grayson, he extended his hand, giving the other a fervent pressure which showed more eloquently than words the pleasure profound and deep he felt at learning the surprising truth.

Moving over to Jack Midwood he took his hand, and said, his voice trembling with emotion, —

"God bless you! You cast your bread upon the waters, but it has returned after many days."



